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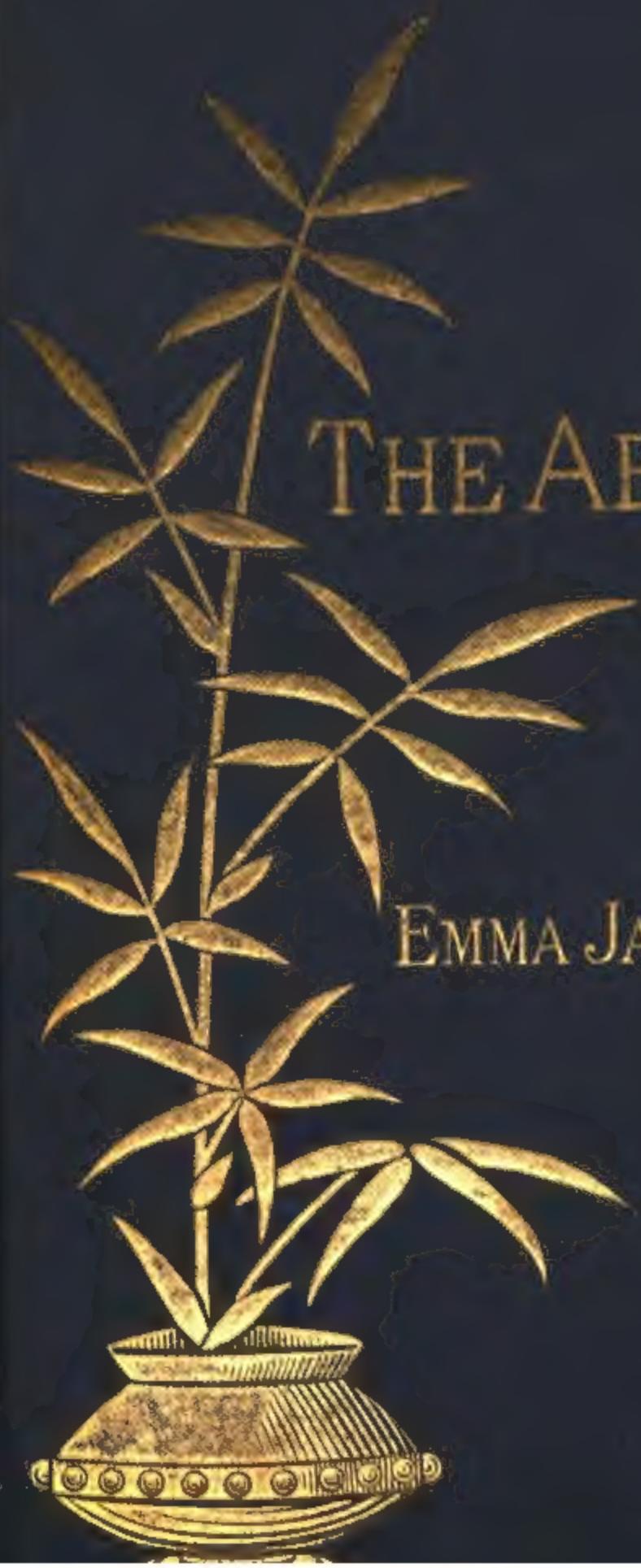
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THE ABBEY MILL

EMMA JANE WORBOISE.



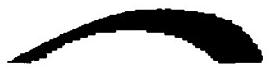
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THE ABBEY MILL.



THE ABBEY MILL

BY

EMMA JANE WORBOISE,

*Author of "Sissie," "The Story of Penelope," "A Woman's Patience,"
"Amy Wilton," "Maude Bolingbroke," &c., &c.*

"Look thro' mine eyes with thine. True wife,
Round my true heart thine arms entwine;
My other dearer life in life,
Look thro' my very soul with thine!
Untouched with any shade of years
May those kind eyes for ever dwell!
They have not shed a many tears,
Dear eyes, since first I knew them well.
* * * * *

But that God bless thee, dear, who wrought
Two spirits to one equal mind—
With blessings beyond hope or thought,
With blessings which no words can find."

ALFRED TENNYSON.

London :

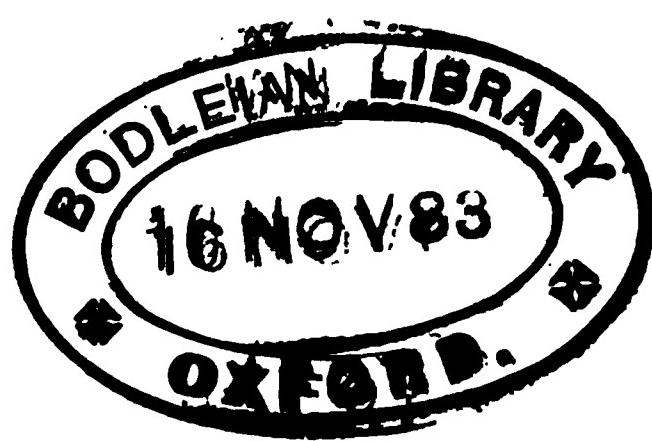
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THE ABBEY MILL.

CHAPTER I.

NORTH TYBURNIA.

“Lowness is young ambition’s ladder,
Whereto the climber upward turns his face ;
But when he once attains the topmost round,
He then unto the ladder turns his back,
Looks in the clouds, scorning the base degrees
By which he did ascend.”

M R. and Mrs. John Thomas Stewart and their flourishing family lived—no ! I beg their pardon, resided, at 27, Kilmarnock Gardens, North Tyburnia.

Now, a few years ago, there was no such place as “North Tyburnia” on the face of the earth—certainly not within a four or five miles’ radius of St. Paul’s. Gardens there doubtless were in the neighbourhood of Kilmarnock, N.B., but the London Postal Directory said nothing about “Kilmarnock Gardens, W.”

Still, there was a large outlying district a little way to the north of a region well known to fame and fashion that had no particular name at all. It was chiefly composed of building-ground “to let ;” of waste fields, given over to short cuts and local cricket clubs ; and of swampy pasture-land, in which a few meek asses and melancholy consumptive cows were constrained to lead a miserable existence. It was bordered at some distance by an immense, yet picturesque cemetery ; and, further still, by a huge railway-

junction, where lines met and crossed and diverged citywards and country-wards and suburban-wards ; and, in fact, to all parts of the kingdom.

One day a “happy thought” flashed across the mind of an influential member of an eminent and colossal building firm, to invest a few thousands, or hundreds of thousands, as the emergency might require, on the barren acres thus temptingly open to competition ; and to erect thereon houses, villas, mansions—forming roads, streets, squares, and crescents—all that should comprise a new and stately West-end neighbourhood, which, when properly completed and inhabited, should redound to the immense and substantial profit of the fortunate speculators. People in these times are not content, like their forefathers, to nurse an idea carefully for a quarter of a century, and then cautiously turn it into fact ; the great builder did not wait for the grass to grow under his feet ; he took counsel with his partners, who were forthwith seized with an access of building fever, and fell with alacrity into his plans.

They were soon at work, and rows of imposing-looking family mansions rose up so quickly as to suggest invidious comparisons with mushrooms, and Aladdin’s palace ; and, what was still more remarkable, they were taken and inhabited before they were fairly finished. The speculation proved to be a first-rate one. The ambition of the eminent firm increased ; their desires were enlarged ; their appetite for gain grew daily keener and keener, and it was resolved at length, on the death of the senior partner—a staid old gentleman of eighty, who for some years past had complained that the world was going mad—to infuse new blood into the concern ; to multiply brains ; to add a few millions by way of capital ; to turn the respectable old firm, which had had its origin in very small beginnings, into the “*Tyburnian Building Company (Limited)* !”

No sooner said than done ! Prospectuses were drawn up on the spot ; men of means and of spirit were invited to co-operate ; the sinews of war were forthcoming ; scheme after scheme was carried out with marvellous rapidity, and —the result was *North Tyburnia* !

“Kilmarnock Gardens” was actually a long, straight road,

at right angles with the prosperous High Street of the grand new town. It was wide and it was uniform. One house was the exact counterpart of the other. There were thirty-five "desirable tenements" on one side and thirty-five on the other ; the odd numbers to the right, as you went down from the High Street end, the even on the left. There had been attempts to produce a boulevard ; but, as happens too frequently in similar cases, those attempts had failed. Here and there survived a wretched specimen of lime, or plane, which seemed to cling pertinaciously to its dwarfed and blighted state of existence ; but the majority of the trees were gone, leaving only traces of their brief, unhappy sojourn in Kilmarnock Gardens in a broken and generally dilapidated state of the flagged pavement.

John Thomas Stewart was one of those lucky individuals who had seen his way clear to join the Tyburnian Company (Limited), and to invest a few spare thousands in the undertaking. He was a man of moderate means only when he first made the venture ; now he was one of the leaders in mercantile society ; his name was good on 'Change ; his opinion was held to be an authority ; his dictum was regarded as all but irreversible.

Mrs. John Thomas Stewart was comely and stout, as became a prosperous matron who was firmly convinced that people only suffered reverse of fortune because they deserved it. And she was not only fat, but fair, forty, and, perhaps, a little more. She was the happy mother of six bouncing daughters, but Providence had denied her the blessing of a son ; the Stewarts were fain to make the best of their half-a-dozen girls, and dispense with a male heir to the family name and fortunes. Mrs. Stewart sat—at the very moment my story really commences—on a brilliant summer evening in her place, at the head of the dinner-table, while her husband, deserting his own orthodox position, had removed to a seat nearer his wife, partly for the convenience of conversation, and partly that he might be nearer the open window, the outside of which was resplendent with blue lobelias, yellow calceolarias, and scarlet and white geraniums. Mrs. Stewart wore a rich blue silk dress of that *intense* and brilliant blue that was

very much in vogue in those unæsthetic days, when people had not begun to stare at sunflowers, or thought of draping themselves in olive greens, or russet browns, or terra-cotta reds. Her cap was an elaborate construction of Honiton lace, blush roses, and marabout feathers ; her jewellery was massive ; her whole appearance striking, and rather ponderous.

But though this wedded pair still lingered over the remnants of their dessert, it was not because they were unduly devoted to the consumption of late oranges, early strawberries, and forced apricots, or because they could not make up their minds to forsake the handsome cut-glass decanters ; they had ceased to take any interest in the fruits and wines before them, and were deeply absorbed in conversation on a subject which had occupied Mrs. Stewart's mind all that day, and for many days previously. She had given the elder young ladies, Mary Jane, and Sarah Anne, and Caroline, a hint not to loiter too long over their dessert, for she had something to say to *papa*. "About Clare, you know, my dears ; for it is high time that little affair was settled."

And Mary Jane and Sarah Anne had agreed that it *was* quite time to come to an understanding ; and, accordingly, the servants had no sooner left the room, than they retired also, exchanging significant glances with their mother, while Caroline only lingered to secure and bear away a dish of preserved ginger, for which she had a weakness.

"Come up to this end of the table, my dear," said Mrs. Stewart, as soon as they were fairly alone ; "I never can talk to you a mile away, across the glasses and the decanters ; besides, it is much cooler at this end of the room, and it is such a pleasant evening."

Mr. Stewart complied, and the discourse commenced, I need not tell you how ; but it ended with, "and so that business is managed at last, and I am devoutly thankful for it !"

"Well, you know best, my dear Mary Jane ; but——"

"John Thomas, my dear, there is no '*but*' to be considered. We've talked it over finally, and we have agreed *that Clare Darlington* is to accept her uncle's invitation. I'd

no objection to her coming here for a few weeks, just while things were put straight ; but when it comes to *months*, and she sticks on like—those what d'ye call 'em things, on rocks and ships' bottoms ?—it's time to make a move. I am sure I would not be inhospitable for the world ; but when we've gone on from Michaelmas to Midsummer almost, and come no nearer to each other than we were at first, it's best to part."

"I suppose it is, my dear. I am sorry, very sorry, that you have taken a dislike to the girl."

"I have not taken a dislike to her, exactly ; only I cannot like her, and it's easy to see she don't like me. Then, she and the girls don't get on. Mary Jane says she is vain and affected, and always thinking of her pretty face ; and Sarah Anne says we've no notion what a temper she has when she's put out. We must consider our own daughters before an alien."

"Not exactly an alien, Mary Jane. Clare Darlington is my own sister's child, and poor dear Fanny and I were very fond of each other in the old time when we lived together at Camberwell, and she and I were all the world to each other. We'd neither of us thought of marrying then."

"A pity she ever thought of it, if she could do no better for herself than accept a man who had every sense but common sense, and whose only idea of money was to spend it."

"I remember we all thought Fanny had made an excellent match. Poor Darlington was every inch a gentleman, and a man of independent means, and the kindest, most generous creature."

"Kind and generous to all but his own family. I don't hold with people being benefactors to others, and leaving their own flesh and blood with a mere pittance that won't keep soul and body together. Why didn't he invest his money properly, so as to leave something respectable for his daughter ? Why did he bring the girl up with the airs of a princess, and leave her the income of a pauper ? And, above all, why did he select *you* of all men, with a large family of your own, and your hands full of business, to be her trustee and guardian ?"

"Well, I dare say he thought of me as his brother-in-law. He thought I would do my best for the orphan."

"And you have done your best. But there are bounds to all things, John Thomas, and charity begins at home."

"But it would not cost much to give her a bit and a sup with the rest at our table, and she has a little of her own, enough to buy her decent frocks and bonnets."

"It is not that. Oh, dear! John Thomas, you *won't* understand. If the girl lived upon oysters—the best natives—and drank wine at a guinea a bottle, we could afford it, thank God! and I don't say I should grudge it to her; but when she stands in the way of my own children, and sows dissension in the bosom of the family, it's too much for *me* to stomach; and you, as a father, ought to know your duty better. And now that she's of age, there's no excuse; she's her own mistress. As she told me herself only the other day, she's got her income in her own hands. Let her make the best of it."

"Her *income*, poor child! What's fifty pounds a-year to feed her and clothe her, and find a shelter for her head? Fancy one of *our* girls thrown on the world at one-and-twenty, with a yearly pittance of fifty pounds!"

"I cannot fancy it. Neither you nor I would ever have been content to go out of the world, knowing that we had behaved in such improvident fashion. A man who does not make proper provision for his own household is no better than an infidel, and I've got Scripture on my side. Dick Darlington was just one of those good-natured fellows whom everybody praises, and nobody cares to serve; he was no one's enemy but his own, and he never looked after number one. The consequence is, he goes and dies when he is just over fifty, and leaves a slip of a girl who has been brought up in luxury she wasn't born to, and who has a temper and a tongue of her own, with next to nothing a-year. She'll have to come down in the world a bit before she knows her place in it."

"You were saying she ought to get her own living?"

"And so she ought. If Providence doesn't give you a ready-made living, you must do one of two things—you must go and get your living *somewhere*; or you must hang on

your wealthier relations, which may be to some people's taste, but it never was to mine. Dear me, John Thomas, I would sooner take in plain sewing, and live in a garret, or get a situation as housemaid, than I would be a poor dependent—a kind of animal I always detested."

"I quite agree with you that Clare might find something to do. There has been a fortune spent on her education. Why can't she stay and teach the twins, and Bella? They must have a governess you say, and Miss Whittingham is going to be married. Give Clare her sixty pounds a-year, and she'll do very well. I have a notion she is more accomplished than Miss Whittingham, and I'm sure she'll do her duty."

"John Thomas, my dear, I've told you already, and more than once or twice, that your little scheme of putting *your* niece into *our* schoolroom won't do. In the first place, it's bad form—*very* bad form, indeed—to have a poor relation in your house to whom you pay wages. She'd just enlist everybody's sympathies on her side, and poison people's minds against you, and against her cousins, if she hasn't done it already. Besides, I am not going to engage another young lady in Miss Whittingham's place. I mean the girls to go to a good, first-rate boarding-school after the holidays. Miss Whittingham herself advises it, and I trust a great deal to her judgment."

"I am not sure, Mary Jane, that I can consent to that; I like to see my little girls every day."

"But if it is for their good you *must* consent, my dear; and they'll get into nice genteel ways at school, that they can't be forced into at home, and they'll make desirable acquaintances. They're quite old enough to see something of the world, and form proper friendships with young ladies of good family. Girls get a certain tone and style, Miss Whittingham says, in a first-class school, that can never be secured in a private education; of course, one would not dream of a *second-rate* establishment—a place where shopkeepers' daughters are likely to be found."

"Mary Jane, you are a shopkeeper's daughter, and I am a shopkeeper's son, and there was a time when Mary Jane, junior, and Sarah Anne were toddling little things, and we

had a modest business of our own. And it was our earliest gains that laid the foundation of our present prosperity. Don't let us despise small beginnings, my dear. I don't like to hear you talk in that way ; it sounds to me rather vulgar, as if we were ashamed of our origin."

"Now, really, Mr. Stewart, I am ashamed of *you*. What is the use of getting on in the world if one is to be always looking back to one's beginnings ? We might as well have gone on living in that little street in South Lambeth ; we might have stuck to the shop and apprenticed out our girls to the millinery and dressmaking, if we are to do nothing better for them than have them to be known as a *tradesman's* daughters. Let by-gones be by-gones ; 'Let the dead past bury its dead,' as dear Lady Tomkins so beautifully said to that disgusting old father of hers, who would talk about tallow-candles. We must take our proper place in society, or we shall be shoved into a corner. And *I* shall never be content with vulgar life again, I promise you, John Thomas. I am ambitious for myself and for my girls, and for *you*, of course—for you are their father, and my wedded husband, and we are all in one boat. But, for goodness' sake, don't drive me wild with talking about old times. You can't undervalue yourself without undervaluing *us* ; and when I've toiled and slaved, and done my very best to acquit myself as a lady of fashion, and to take my proper place in society as the wife of a *gentleman* of large income, it's very hard upon me to have shops and shopkeepers flung in my face. It's cruel ; it's unmanly ! And when you think what a good wife I've been to you, John Thomas, it's what you didn't ought to condescend to."

And Mrs. Stewart's emotion resolved itself into tears. Considering her real ignorance of grammar, and the not-too-cultivated society in which she had once moved, she really spoke with tolerable correctness, and very seldom offended educated ears. But if she became at all excited, she lapsed into former habits, which had been long ago discarded, and, alone with her husband, she murdered the Queen's English without compunction. She was a woman of ability and of quick perceptions, and she could take a hint readily. She had taken lessons in etiquette and in the

code of common social life with so much dexterity, and accommodated herself so well to her improved circumstances, that it was a pity she stopped short where she did, and contented herself with the fine-ladyisms which she believed to represent the aristocratic manners of the "upper ten." If her aspirations had only been a little higher, her aim a little nobler, there is no saying to what success, as a woman of the world, she might not have attained.

Mr. Stewart, like most married men, strongly objected to tears, and Mary Jane had far too much good sense to waste more than a minute or two in superfluous weeping. "Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean," was all unconsciously her motto, for it was her maxim never to indulge in displays of feeling, or in feelings themselves, that only resulted in waste of physical or mental force. So when John Thomas showed his disturbance by pouring out an extra glass of his best Madeira instead of his customary *Beaujolais*, and threatened to light his cigar and take a walk to a distant terrace to see how the workmen were getting on, she speedily regained her composure, and turned back to the theme of conversation on the fortunes of Clare Darlington.

Now Clare Darlington was certainly out of place in her present domicile. She did not "get on" with her cousins, the Misses Stewart—especially the elder ones. With Mary Jane, junior, and Sarah Anne, and to some extent with Caroline, the third daughter, she was generally at open war; with Miss Whittingham and the schoolroom party, she was not invariably on friendly terms; and she avoided her aunt's society as much as possible. As for her uncle, she got on very well with him when there was no one else to interfere, or misinterpret anything she said; but in her secret soul she despised him—not for his want of scholarship, or his lapses in perfect breeding, or for his general lack of culture, but for his weakness—his *cowardice* she called it—in yielding to the stronger and more ignoble sway of his wife and daughters.

Clare was the only surviving child of Richard Darlington, a gentleman by birth, who was imprudent enough to marry

pretty, ladylike Fanny Stewart, who was neither his equal by birth, nor by position, and who brought him no fortune, save her lovely face, her natural sweetness, and her fervent affection for himself. She had made him the happy father of two fine children, and had lived to see the eldest, a clever lad of fifteen, carrying off the honours and prizes of the public-school where he was being educated, prior to keeping his terms at the University. Then she died ; to the irreparable loss of her family, and the unfeigned grief of her husband, who was never quite the same man after his bereavement. The son died also, just as he gave promise of the most brilliant talents and great excellence of character ; and Clare was left the sole comfort and companion of her mourning father.

Richard Darlington was the *cadet* of what the world calls “a good old family.” He had inherited a handsome fortune, which, without reckless extravagance, he contrived entirely to dissipate ; he had not been brought up to any profession, still less had he dreamed of mercantile pursuits. He was naturally dreamy and inert ; he had begun to write several books that were to have secured to him an European reputation ; but when he died they were left unfinished, one and all. He had been a scholar, a man of literary tastes, a lover and devotee of the *belles-lettres*, and he had been nothing more ! Genius he undoubtedly possessed, and he had a fine imagination ; but he lacked the virtue of persistency ; he had not the invaluable gift of “ pegging-away ” at whatever he attempted ; in him was too frequently exemplified the fable of the Hare and the Tortoise. Many and splendid were his commencements ; his completed works were—*nil*. Had his wife lived, she might have urged him on to something better, for she knew his weaknesses, though she loved him dearly, and she was proud of his manifold accomplishments, and fully believed that *some day* he would win the palm of a brilliant success.

After her death he became more visionary than ever, and, worse still, he let his affairs drift into confusion, which soon became serious embarrassments, and ended in downright difficulties that presented a most unpleasant aspect. But *things* could be put right, he argued with himself ; nothing

was easier than to "sell out," as he had done more than once before. And he *did* "sell out" accordingly, but this time at a tremendous sacrifice, that startled even his easy, *laissez-aller* disposition. Still, he was comparatively young, and men often did their best work after middle life was past. There was still plenty of time for the triumphs he had contemplated ; he would earn fame yet, and something more solid than fame ; for his child's sake he would persevere ; she should be a great heiress, and proud of her father's literary reputation. But, somehow, he could not settle to any particular field of labour ; he coquetted with the Muse as he had done from his boyhood upwards ; he sketched out the plan of a great Epic in twelve Books, and the first was finished in less than a fortnight. He had not nearly reached the end of the second Book when he wearied of his self-imposed task ; the Muse was coy and *difficile*. Pegasus would not go in harness. So the Epic was laid aside till the mood should be more propitious, and never seriously resumed.

A learned Dictionary of Scandinavian Mythology was commenced, but it only reached the letter B, breaking off in the middle of an exhaustive article on the mythical history of *Balder the Beautiful*. He trifled a little with fiction, having grand ideas of a three-volume novel that was to be the novel of the century ; and the plot was partly sketched out—that was all. He died rather suddenly, as the doctors said, of a neglected cold ; and he left Clare sole heiress of all and everything he possessed, and his brother-in-law, John Thomas Stewart, with whom he had had but little intercourse of late years, her guardian and executor.

He had no true idea of the state in which his affairs were, neither had Clare, though she had strong suspicions of the reality of her boasted heiress-ship. But things were far worse than she had anticipated ; she had no notion of the complete wreck of her father's once ample fortune ; she did not know that he had been tempted into several rash speculations that would never have deluded a more business-like man, and that everything that had been risked was lost irretrievably. She had hoped, even after she had begun to perceive the sombreness of her prospects, that two, or,

perhaps, *three hundred* a-year would yet remain to her, but she was miserably disappointed when at length she discovered that something under fifty pounds was all she could rely upon as her annual income.

Mr. Stewart insisted on her finding a home with him, at least, he told her, "till her affairs were comfortably settled." He felt that he could not answer for his wife, and he dared not act on his own responsibility; at the same time he was positively assured that her "*affairs*" were as settled as they ever could be. He had not without difficulty reserved the miserable pittance that remained, and no further windfall could be reasonably expected. So, three months after Mr. Darlington's death, the household was finally broken up—their last residence had been in Paris—and Clare went to take up her abode at Kilmarnock Gardens.

Unluckily, Clare inherited her mother's grace and beauty, and the Misses Stewart were not even pretty—could scarcely, except by courtesy, be called "*good-looking!*" Then Clare's ways were not their ways, nor her aunt's ways either. Mrs. Stewart was not a badly-disposed woman, but she had the passions of a tigress where her own offspring was closely concerned, and Clare had not been three months in the house when it was affirmed that she had "*appropriated*" the affections of a young man—the Honourable and Reverend Constantine Delany—who was supposed on all hands to be the *prétendu* of Mary Jane, junior. He was only a curate now, but he might be a bishop, or even an archbishop, some day, and his father was "*a Lord,*" Mrs. Stewart reflected; and though John Thomas seriously disapproved of the match, *she* gave her unqualified consent in anticipation of the offer that was never made.

The young man himself affirmed that he had never for one moment contemplated an alliance with Miss Stewart, who was the least attractive of the three sisters who were "*out.*" She had become quite suddenly rather "*High Church,*" going to matins, and vespers, and evensong, and Litanies, &c., with a perseverance worthy of an embryo nun, and she had been seized with a passion for Sunday-school teaching, and for district-visiting and church decorations, *which threw* her continually into the Hon. Mr. Delany's

society. He was ungallant enough to aver that she made "a dead set" at him, and he took care to let it be known that he very much disapproved of the very practices which were supposed to please him. He did not believe in clergymen's wives *as such*, any more than in physicians' wives as female physicians. He thought ladies might find plenty to do in their own homes, without constituting themselves into something very much like feminine clerics. Whether he was quite sincere in all that he said on this point, and at this particular time, is by no means certain; but one thing is quite sure—he fell madly in love with Clare Darlington, and made open proposals for her hand, and Mrs. Stewart and her three eldest daughters were furious, and Clare was supposed to have ruined her cousin's prospects, blighted her happiness, and alienated her lover's affections.

It was in vain that Clare pleaded her entire innocence of the charge brought against her. She had never encouraged Mr. Delany, for she really had supposed him to be her cousin's presumed suitor, and, what was still more to the purpose, she had rather disliked him, and would certainly have rejected his addresses had there been no such person as Mary Jane Stewart in existence. But Mary Jane was bitterly disappointed, and she confided to her mother that not one of them would have the remotest chance of "settling" while Clare, with her pale, proud face and her grand ways, was in the house.

Other sources of dispute had arisen, and Miss Darlington was not one to comport herself meekly under the treatment she sustained in the family. Though she is my heroine, I am fain to confess that she was no sweet, saintly martyr, bearing with gentle endurance the manifest wrongs of her unhappy destiny.

It was a great relief to all the family when she was asked to go and pay a long visit to some relations in the country, the Darlings of the Old Abbey Mill, at Duston, in Moorlandshire. But at first Mr. Stewart would not consent to her departure, neither was she herself quite willing to become the inmate of a household which she had every reason to believe was wholly rustic and uncultured.

CHAPTER II.

NOTICE TO QUIT.

“Alone ! that worn-out word,
So idly spoken, and so coldly heard ;
Yet all that poets sing, and grief hath known,
Of hopes laid waste, knells in that word—alone !”

AND all the while this after-dinner talk was going on downstairs, Clare Darlington was sitting, saddened and alone, in her little bedroom at the top of the house. When she first arrived in Kilmarnock Gardens, she had been accorded the common honours of a visitor. The best guest-chamber, with its handsome winged wardrobe, well-appointed dressing-table, and velvet pile carpet, was at her disposal ; for Mr. Stewart had been guilty of something like subterfuge, simply informing his better-half that his ward inherited “all her father’s property,” without giving her a hint of the absurd smallness of the inheritance. Her affairs, he added, were by no means settled, and of course she would remain with them till such time as her arrangements for the future should be matured.

Miss Darlington, therefore, might be a great heiress or she might not ; and Mary Jane, senior, considerately gave her the benefit of the doubt, and treated her as became her pleasant position as a young lady of good expectation, and the *ward* of her husband, into the bargain. Nevertheless, she did not approve of the girl’s tone and manner, any more than of her graceful figure, her statuesque beauty of face, and her faultless complexion. Never did goose credit her own goslings with swan-like charms more fully than Mrs. Stewart believed in the personal attractions of her daughters ; and yet she had, from the very first, an uneasy conviction that they showed to decided disadvantage in the presence of their stately cousin.

For the Misses Stewart were neither tall nor slender; *they were fine* young women, no doubt, of a certain type—

having well-formed, sturdy limbs, dark bright eyes, and cheeks "like damask-roses," according to their mother's partial estimate. But they evinced a more decided inclination to *embonpoint* than was desirable at such an early age ; they displayed square shoulders, and large coarse hands, and they made matters worse by lacing tightly, and wearing gloves that were at least two sizes smaller than they ought to have been ; their eyes, though dark, were rather glittering than lustrous ; their features were far from classic, and the bloom of which they were so vain was rather deeper and fuller than one would wish to see on the countenance of even the "Queen rose of the rosebud garden of girls."

But notwithstanding these detractions from the "personal appearance," on which their mother dwelt so often, and with such evident complacency, they might have fairly passed muster in a crowd ; they might have been much plainer than they actually were without exciting any adverse criticism, had they been blessed with a sweeter expression. But Mary Jane, junior, carried herself so haughtily as to excite the most unfriendly remarks ; and when she was not pleased—which was very often—her large red lips pouted, not at all *prettily* ; there was a scowl on her brow, and people generally said she looked sour and spiteful. She was certainly the least handsome of Mrs. Stewart's brood, but, curiously enough, her mother esteemed her in person, as in mind—"the flower of the family."

Sarah Anne looked rather less unamiable than her elder sister, though upon occasions she could personate the shrew. Caroline was heavy and ungainly, with a stolid cast of features that reminded one involuntarily of the delightful couplet :—

" I care for nobody ; no, not I,
And nobody cares for me."

The three younger girls still in the schoolroom we need not describe. "They will not be at all bad-looking if they can but get some animation into their faces, and cultivate frankness and good humour," was the private dictum of the governess, who had been politic enough to hold her own in the Stewart household for a period of two years and more. But she was thankful to reflect that ere long her

bondage would terminate ; and great was her satisfaction when she remembered that her contemplated marriage would free her from the necessity of requiring from Mrs. Stewart the usual testimonials.

The mother and the father of these young people were, strange to say, of rather prepossessing appearance. Mr. Stewart had a pleasant, kindly, sensible face ; and his wife was "comely," and looked like the comfortable, prosperous, well-satisfied British matron she really was. Perhaps, by some extraordinary and inexplicable law of natural selection, Mary Jane and her sisters had been unfortunate enough to inherit all the most unlovely attributes of both parents, to the exclusion of their more attractive qualities. Certainly they could not bear comparison with Clare's superior charms ; and it was sometimes invidiously remarked that they served as so many foils to her uncommon loveliness.

But to return to Miss Darlington herself, who was sitting on that fair summer evening all sad and forlorn, in an upper chamber,—I must premise that she was an extremely proud young lady ; not vain, remember. Vanity and pride are widely dissimilar, and not often to be found flourishing in the self-same soil. Vanity is a mean, plebeian vice, indicative of weak brains and shallow nature. Clare was too proud to be vain ; she knew the value of her beauty, but she seldom thought about it, regarding it rather as a fortunate accident than as an extraordinary gift. She would not have liked to be ugly, or even plain, for she had her father's fastidious tastes, and it would have irked her to behold an unpleasing reflection of herself every time she looked in the glass ; but she really bestowed very little admiration on herself ; she did not worship at her own shrine, as her cousins, judging her by themselves, continually accused her of doing. She had sometimes even a scorn for herself ; but then, self-scorn is not seldom unallied with pride, and a prouder spirit than Clare Darlington's it was difficult to imagine.

I told you how she had been in the first place lodged in the chief guest-room, but a very few weeks saw her accommodated in a humbler but still comfortable apartment ; a *third change*, however, awaited her : she was removed to a

much smaller and far less convenient chamber in the top-most story, where only the servants slept, and where, on the pretext that several visitors were expected, a good-sized lumber-closet was hastily prepared for her reception. This was early in February, when her footing in the family was more clearly understood. By this time Mr. Delany was her declared suitor; a recent acquaintance, with whom Mrs. Stewart was very anxious to be on intimate terms, had spoken to her of that "lovely girl, your niece;" and, to crown all, Clare, resenting bitterly the injustice and unkindness to which she had been subjected, flung down the cartel of defiance in the very teeth of her adversaries.

She was sitting at the window in the fast-fading light, with an open letter lying in her lap. The evening was fair enough, but the skies of North Tyburnia were seldom brilliant and clear; from her airy point of vantage she looked over miles and miles of ugly brick and mortar, and over acres of slated and tiled roofs, and legions of smoking chimneys. As far as the eye could reach were houses and churches, buildings of one sort or another, and in the distance there was a faint winding line of mist, that marked the progress of the river. There was a hum of life in the air, as there always is in the neighbourhood of London; there was a noise, too, of merry shouting from a party of boyish cricketers on a waste piece of ground near by; the tinkle-tinkle of sundry neighbouring pianos could be heard inharmoniously enough as the sound ascended; and presently there came a street-organ that disconsolately moaned out the beautiful but hackneyed tune of "*Ah! che la morte.*"

As it grew darker Clare felt so melancholy that she could hardly keep the tears from rising in her eyes. Only a year—a little year ago, and how different were her surroundings. Then, she was her father's petted darling, the mistress of his small, but exquisite, *bijou* of a home in the Champs-Elysées. She was the centre of a brilliant circle, the favoured intimate of many of the leaders of society in the gay capital where then her happy lot was cast. Many loved her, and all admired her, or so she had been taught to believe,—now, where were the friends and lovers of that

fairy-dream? Where the elegancies and luxuries to which she had been all her life accustomed?—where, “the feast of reason and the flow of soul,” the sparkling wit, the exchange of noble thought, which had been her continual portion ever since she was old enough to join the social and literary set to which her father had always belonged?

Once more she strained her eyes over the written page that she held in her hand, and once more, for the twentieth time it might have been, she re-read the words that had become so painfully familiar. The letter was from Mrs. Darlington, of Duston, the wife of the miller at the Abbey Mill, a distant cousin of her father's, and one of the very few relations who acknowledged her existence; for Mr. Richard Darlington's nearest of kin had never forgiven him for the *mésalliance* he had committed in marrying gentle Fanny Stewart. There had been no communication, since the days of long ago, with those Darlings who imagined that they had been wronged and disgraced by their inconsiderate relative, who had had the ineffable presumption to choose a wife according to his own fancy, and without consulting the high and mighty personages who esteemed themselves the Heads of the Family.

Richard Darlington, having his own income, and no ambition requiring aristocratic influence, and despising patronage generally, troubled himself not at all about the matter. They gave him the cold shoulder, and there was an end of it; they ignored his sweet wife, and that made him very angry; but, after the lapse of a few years, he became so used to the neglect of his own connections that he almost forgot their existence, and seldom thought of them, except in the most cursory way when he saw the name in the public newspapers, when some member of the family attained to any special honour, or made himself distinguished, or was born, or died, or committed matrimony. And so time passed away, and the severance came to be as complete as if no tie had ever existed. Clare knew that she had rich and well-born relations, but her knowledge ended there; they were “distantly connected,” she and these patrician cousins whom she had never seen; they were nothing, and never could be anything to her, or she to

them. "They would not acknowledge me to save their lives," her father had once said to her; "and I am sure I do not want to be acknowledged; when the world owns me as a great genius, and a scholar, they will be glad enough to extend the right hand of fellowship; but they may whistle for any notice or countenance from *me*; they may be all dead and buried for aught I know or for aught I care; a quarter of a century sweeps away the elders of a generation; and it is so long since I or any kinsman of mine clasped hands."

So it came to pass that Clare Darlington's grand relations had really no idea of her existence, nor had they hitherto excited in her mind the faintest curiosity who they were, where they lived, or what was the degree of consanguinity between herself and them. But now, orphaned, and all alone in the world, she did wish sometimes that something had been done to try to heal the breach between them while yet it was possible.

But there was another branch of the Darlings with whom her father and her mother—while she lived—had always kept up a ceremonious sort of correspondence; and these were the Darlings who, hearing from Mr. Stewart of the girl's desolate condition, wrote and asked her to come to them, and make "one of themselves," for as long or short a time as suited her convenience.

Robert Darlington, the miller of Duston, was only her father's far-away cousin; but his wife, Margaret, commonly called *Margery*, had reminded her that "blood was thicker than water;" and that once upon a time—some few generations back—they *must* have had a mutual ancestor.

You would have thought that, situated as Clare was, she would have hailed with rapture the chance thus unexpectedly afforded her of escaping from the chill and unkindly atmosphere of North Tyburnia. But it was not so. Her father had always spoken of these Moorlandshire Darlings as simple, honest *rustics*, whom he rather honoured by his notice. He used to address him as "Dear Cousin Robert," on those rare occasions when a letter was addressed to the master of the old Abbey Mill.

Once, in his early married days, when Clare's brother was a very little fellow, and Clare herself unborn, a visit had been paid to the Darlings of the Mill, but never returned by them to the Darlings of Chelsea. There was no affinity of mind and taste, or so it seemed, between the polished London man of literature and the jocund unlettered miller of the country.

Now, you must know that Clare inherited most of her father's peculiarities, and some of them were very peculiar indeed, so much so as to deserve to be classed as prejudices, and unreasonable prejudices, too. One of these was a rooted dislike to living in the country, a cherished antipathy to rustic life, and an obstinate adherence to all the manners and forms of urban society. Clare had always been taught to consider uneducated and half-educated people as *barbarians*. She did not despise them, she was too kind-hearted for that ; but she, and her father, and his set, were "*nous autres*." It never occurred to her that any association with them was possible—she simply ignored them.

Margaret Darlington's letter was kind and motherly, but her pen was *not* the pen of a ready writer ; the rules of English composition she certainly knew nothing about, and grammar she most innocently and complacently set at defiance.

"Well ! I suppose I cannot be much worse off than I am !" was Clare's conclusion, as she folded up the letter, and put it in her dress-pocket ; "they are a vulgar set here, and extremely disagreeable into the bargain. But, still, it *is* London ; though one is quite out of anything like congenial society one can get into the parks, and into the Horticultural Gardens ; and there are concerts, and the theatres, and Westminster Abbey, and miles and miles of gas-lamps and of pavement. But to live for months—perhaps for years—out of sound and sight of the civilisation of a great city ; to be always with uneducated people, who know no more of literature and refinement than I know of the interior of flour-mills. One has a chance here of escaping now and then into a breathable atmosphere—*there*, one is shut up for ever and for ever, like the Hamadryads of ancient story. *And yet, have I any choice ? have I an alternative ?*"

Just then, some one came stumbling up the steep and narrow stairs that led to the attic-story, and the next minute there was a loud knock or rather *bang* at her door, and the latch was rattled imperatively. Fortunately for Clare, the lumber-room had a key, and she had locked herself in, as usual, knowing that otherwise she was open to sudden invasion at any moment. It was almost dark on the upper landing, but Miss Darlington recognised the advent of her cousin Caroline before she saw her; no one else could make quite so much noise, no one else had such a dreadful habit of *snorting* when displeased. She was not in an amiable mood that evening, and she had run upstairs so fast as to be out of breath. She did not see why she should be sent on errands any more than Mary Jane and Sarah Anne; and *they* never would put themselves out of the way for anything or anybody.

"Clare!" cried the third Miss Stewart, as she dropped down heavily on her cousin's bed; "you are to come down this minute, to hear what ma has to say to you. She thought you were out, or she would have sent for you an hour ago."

"Very well; where is Mrs. Stewart?"

"She is in the back drawing-room. Make haste, now, for it is getting late. You've no business to shut yourself up in your room like this; we all thought you had gone out for a walk. You needn't stop to get yourself up; there is no one there, *but* ma."

"I must wash my hands," said Clare, groping her way to the shabby little stand in the corner. She knew, too, that her hair was very much dishevelled, and she was sadly afraid that her face showed traces of weeping.

"Well, make haste," replied the young lady, who had now flung herself across the bed; "I've given you my message, and ma will be fine and angry if she is kept waiting."

When Clare reached the lower landing, it was all ablaze with light, and she was quite dazzled at the sudden transition from the obscurity of her own quarters, where gas was a luxury unknown. In the back drawing-room was Mrs. Stewart, and also Mary Jane, junior, both sitting in great state; there was evidently some kind of scene to be enacted;

why could they not content themselves with letting her go to bed in the dark without any supper.

"Caroline says you wish to speak to me, aunt?" began Clare, with that quiet self-possession and manifest unconcern that always angered Mrs. Stewart past endurance; while her daughter would have given all she possessed to be able to imitate what she privately acknowledged to herself to be "a most dignified and aristocratic style."

"Speak to you? and so I do," broke in Mrs. Stewart, peevishly; "I should have been in bed an hour ago with my wretched headache if it had not been for *you*. Where have you been hiding yourself, pray?"

"I have been in my own room; I generally sit there in the evening now that it is light so long."

"What have you been doing?"

"Nothing."

"You could not well do less. I wonder you are not ashamed of yourself, wasting your time, as you do, hour after hour. Don't you know what the hymn says about Satan—*Satan* mind—finding mischief for idle hands to do? But *there*, I suppose you never learned your *Watts*, like any other Christian child. I dare say you studied Byron or Tom Moore, or something equally improper."

"What is it you wish to say to me, please?"

"I wish to know whether you are ready to go off, pack and package, to your friends at the mill, to-morrow, or next day?"

"I have not written to Mrs. Robert Darlington; I had not quite made up my mind."

"Then you will have to have it made up for you, for *we* are going to the seaside next week, and the house is to be shut up, and the servants left on board wages. It's not the *season*, I am aware, but my dear Mary Jane needs change of air and of scene, after all she has gone through. Her nerves are thoroughly shaken, the doctor says, and he won't answer for the consequences, if there's consumption in the family, which there used to be, I know. Oh, Clare Darlington, you've a deal to answer for."

"I do not pretend to misunderstand you," returned Clare, composedly, "for you have already expounded yourself

pretty freely on the subject. It is, however, of no use to say any more ; I am very sorry that Mr. Delany should have made such a foolish mistake as to take any notice of me ; but I cannot see that I am to blame. Tastes differ, you know, and if he had the bad perverse taste to prefer me to Mary Jane it was no fault of mine."

"But you know—you *do* know!" interrupted Mary Jane, passionately, "that you encouraged him—you led him on. We were happy till you came. All went well till *you* appeared upon the scene. *You came between us!*"

"I do not think I did," returned Clare, calmly ; "but really, it is of no use talking over the affair again. I refused Mr. Delany ; I could do no more."

"Coquettes always do refuse ninety-nine lovers before they accept the hundredth," retorted Mary Jane, junior. "Well ! I wouldn't be a *flirt* for anything under heaven, that I wouldn't. *I* wouldn't have broken hearts and wrecked lives on *my* conscience, not if, after all, I might marry a royal prince. *I* couldn't smile on the wreck of another woman's happiness." And she burst into a passion of hysterical weeping.

"Compose yourself, my darling child !" entreated Mrs. Stewart, putting her handkerchief to her eyes. "You have suffered cruelly ; you have been most shamefully deceived. But take heart, dearie, you don't know what's in store for you yet ; the day may come when you will be thankful to think that that ungrateful, treacherous *serpent* of a cousin of yours stepped in between you. There's as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it, trust me ; and you are not much over twenty."

"I shall never—never love again ; no—never," wept Mary Jane, junior. "Some day, *perhaps*, Clare may have to suffer the same deep sorrow. But it is not very likely, for she has no heart ; a marble statue could feel as much as she. Why, mamma dear, she laughed at me, the other day, when I was finding a little sad comfort in singing 'The last links are broken !' she could not even perceive the pathos of those exquisite lines—

"Oh, I have not loved lightly, I'll think of thee yet,
'I'll pray for thee nightly, till life's sun be set !'"

Alas, it was a true bill. Clare *had* laughed at her cousin's pathetic rendering of the sentimental song. *She* preferred "I Stood on the Bridge at Midnight," or something equally breezy and deep-thoughted ; or, if she went in for pathos at all, it was—"Douglas ! Douglas ! tender and true ;" or "When sparrows build, and the leaves break forth," or something of the kind.

"Never mind," said Mrs. Stewart, consolingly ; "a nature like hers is not able to understand a sensitive spirit such as yours, Mary Jane. She has neither generosity, nor gratitude, nor principle ; when she is gone, perhaps we shall be happy once more."

"I sincerely hope you will," said Clare, coldly. "Am I to understand, then, that you wish me to leave you *immediately?*"

"You must have been excessively stupid not to have understood it long ago. We are all tired of you ; you *might* have found a happy home with us, if you had chosen to be one of us ; if you had not poisoned the happiness of those who opened their doors to you in your hour of distress. But you have done your best to sow the seeds of dissension among us ; you have even induced my husband to speak to me as he never spoke before. No ; don't interrupt me ; you *have* made mischief between your uncle and myself—as much mischief, at least, as you could make. He took your part, at first ; he accused us of 'envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness ;' but he knows you better now—he will rejoice, as I do, when we are relieved from your presence."

"I am very sorry I ever troubled your house," said Clare, bitterly. "I will write my letter, and post it *to-night*, if you like. I will beg Mrs. Darlington to expect me—*when?*"

"Why, she won't get the letter till the day after to-morrow. Duston is quite an out-of-the-way place, I am told, remote from railways ; so you had better say 'early next week ;' we shall not start for Tenby before Thursday, or perhaps Friday. What has made you so long deciding ; you certainly do not care for *us?*"

"I cannot bear the idea of going to live in the country. *I have* always been used to town-life. I have never known

anything more rural than the suburbs of Paris or London, except for a week or two."

"I thought you had travelled a good deal?"

"So I have; but travelling and settling down are quite different things. I have been five weeks in Scotland, and papa and I spent a month in visiting the English lakes; and I have gone about a good deal abroad; but always meeting friends, and knowing that we were on the wing, and would soon be at home again."

"Well, you must make the best of the country. I do not think country ways would suit me. I've always been accustomed to London life; I should go daft at the seaside, after a month, unless it was Brighton. But beggars can't be choosers, you know, and you must go where you'll be provided for. I should advise you to look out for a situation."

"I have thought of that," replied Clare, frankly; "but I do not know what kind of situation I could fill."

"Why! your education must have cost a lot; and then you've gone about in foreign parts, and speak the languages."

"Yes, I can speak French and German; but I have not the least idea how to set about teaching them, and I am sure I should hate teaching. I am not clever enough to write a book, and I should starve while I was writing it. They used to tell me I had taste in millinery, but I expect no milliner in her senses would hire me as her assistant. It is astonishing of how little use our accomplishments become when we want to turn them to actual account."

"If you were a steady, sensible girl, and knew how to keep a civil tongue in your head, I should advise you to look out for a companion's situation; you can play and sing and read, but no one ever would put up with your high and haughty ways; you would never behave as a dependent should. I could not, on any account, recommend you as a companion."

"I shall never ask you. And now, if you please, I will say 'good-night,' for I am very tired."

"Tired of doing nothing?" laughed Mary Jane.

"Tired of unkindness—of unmerited insult. I want to

go to bed now that I may rise betimes to-morrow morning, and make all preparations for my departure. Let me see ; it is Wednesday night, and I think it must be something like a two-days' post to Duston. Will you be content if I arrange to be with Mrs. Darlington next Tuesday ? ”

“ That will do very well ! I don't want to hurry you, and drive you away, like ; but you really have not behaved properly in our house, and there will be a nasty feeling between you and Mary Jane as long as you stay ; and Sarah Anne is a little afraid of you, for there's somebody that she thinks is sweet upon *her*, and you would be sure to put your spoke in the wheel, and there's no saying what unpleasantness might not turn up. Good-night ! I daresay you'll find some supper in the schoolroom.”

“ Do you know, I am a little sorry for her, though she did play me such a mean trick,” said Mary Jane, when Clare was gone. “ I really believe she hasn't a friend in the world, and she has next to no money, and doesn't know how to get her living. I don't envy her ; but I should like to be able to walk out of the room as she does—like a queen.”

“ Like a stage-queen, perhaps,” sneered Mrs. Stewart. “ It shan't be said that I drove her out of the house ill-naturedly ; but I am downright thankful that it is settled for her to go away. And I sincerely hope she will never find her way back to us any more.”



CHAPTER III.

DEPARTURE.

“ All as God wills, who wisely heeds
To give or to withhold,
And knoweth more of all my needs
Than all my prayers have told.”

AS you may imagine, Clare Darlington wrote a letter to her cousin Margery before she went to bed. Indeed, *she had* in her mind to post it also, but when she had

finally closed and stamped the missive, she found that it was quite too late ; the whole household had retired, and the hall-door was locked and bolted for the night. Her first idea was to slip quietly out, and drop the letter into the new pillar-post at the next turning, so anxious was she now to expedite the affair ; but a moment's reflection convinced her of the inexpediency of such a step ; she had never in her life been in the streets at such an hour unaccompanied, and if she were brave enough, or rash enough, to venture forth, she shuddered at the idea of the comments to be expected from her aunt and cousins, should they, as was highly probable, discover the escapade.

"No, it won't do," said Clare to herself, when she had reached the hall, which of course was in darkness, save for the glimmer of the summer-night that stole in everywhere. "I could never stir those massive bolts without rousing the house, and perhaps being fired at for a burglar, and Mrs. Stewart and Mary Jane would certainly refuse to be convinced that I was not bent on some nefarious errand. I will be prudent, and leave it till the morning ; I can run out as soon as the servants are down."

So, very softly, Clare reascended to her attic, and found her candle just flickering in the socket ; she would have liked to commence packing there and then, but finding it impossible, she decided to wait till daylight, and meanwhile flung herself on her bed, just to rest her weary limbs till the dawn appeared. It seemed useless to think of sleep ; her nerves were strung to too high a pitch, her brain was too much excited, she told herself, to admit of even brief forgetfulness ; nevertheless, as she lay on her coverlet, eagerly watching the window to see if the stars paled, slumber surprised her, and she slept the healthy, dreamless sleep of youth, till the morning was well advanced, and the whole household was astir.

Some sound below awoke her at last, and the sun was shining brilliantly ; she sprang up to consult her watch, but that had stopped at a quarter to five—she had forgotten to wind it up at the usual hour. It must be very late, she feared ; already there were the tradesmen's carts in the streets, and a man was crying "fine fresh strawberries!"

Stepping out on to the landing, she was somewhat reassured, for the notes of the school-room piano told her that "early practice" was not yet over, and finally she discovered that no one had breakfasted, save, indeed, her uncle, who took his hasty meal and was off to business, without awaiting the somewhat tardy appearance of his family.

In a very few minutes Clare had safely deposited her letter. At breakfast-time no one spoke to her except Mary Jane, who inquired whether she had begun to write her letter. She promptly answered, "Yes, it is begun and finished and posted likewise, and well on its way, I hope, to Cousin Darlington."

But as she was rising from table before the others, on the plea of having much to attend to, Mrs. Stewart said, with a little hesitation, "Of course you will take with you *everything* you have here?"

"All my clothes, certainly," replied Clare, a little startled ; "but there are my books, and papa's papers, and the mineralogical cabinet, and many things, which I shall not require on a visit."

"Still, I do not wish any of your property to remain in this house," was Mrs. Stewart's imperturbable answer ; "you had better *warehouse* what you do not want. There is the Pantechicon, you know, and the place in Baker Street."

"How they do hate me," thought Clare, as she left the room, without further rejoinder. "Is this an intimation that I am *never* to revisit Kilmarnock Gardens even for a single night? Well, it may be for the best, though it is inconvenient, and I was not prepared for it ; I am sure I never wish to see again any Stewart of them all."

That day she packed and packed till she was ready to drop from fatigue, and no one offered her the least assistance. Late in the afternoon she set out for Jermyn Street, where an old servant of her father's resided—Mrs. Lock, a widow, who let lodgings ; and it struck Clare that she might safely leave in her keeping such things as it would certainly be inexpedient, if not impossible, to take with her into the country.

Mrs. Lock, *alias* "Nancy," received her late mistress with open arms. She was come to drink tea, *of course!* and nothing that Clare could say availed to prevent her bringing out the best china, and putting the kettle on the fire. "Don't you tell me, Miss Clare," said Mrs. Lock, when her visitor's remonstrances were exhausted, "I know you're dying for a good cup of tea, such as I used to make you and your poor pa in Cheyne Row, years and years agone, when you were quite a little maid. My! what a fine young lady you've growed up, so tall and slim, and like a princess; but I should have known you anywhere; I'm very full just now, for it's the height of the season, but the drawing-room is out for the day—gone to Richmond, he said, so we'll take our tea up there, all proper and genteel, Miss Clare."

"I would much rather have it down here," pleaded Clare; "it would seem so much more homely, and I have a favour to ask you." After a little more persuasion, Mrs. Lock consented to set the table in her comfortable kitchen. The kettle came to the boil, the good woman brought out her choicest tea, generally reserved for state occasions, and the little maid of all work was mysteriously despatched on various errands, which resulted in the appearance of muffins, pound-cake, fresh eggs, shrimps and prawns, watercress, and certain other delicacies, supposed to supplement the bread-and-butter, and preserves, and honey, and juicy ham already in cut. Clare protested against the trouble she was giving, but she was all the better for a good meal, and Mrs. Lock was in a state of rapture at her good luck in being able to entertain her honoured guest. It was something so new to be made much of, that Clare almost forgot her unhappy position, and began to talk over old times with an effusion to which she had long been a stranger.

But something presently transpired that recalled the recollection of existing annoyances, and Miss Darlington explained her requirements: would Nancy be so very kind as to take charge of certain belongings of hers, during her absence from town? She rather objected to the plan which Mrs. Stewart had proposed.

"Sure I'll take good care of your boxes, dearie, and be proud to," said Nancy, when she understood what was

wanted. " You are quite right not to trouble yourself about *Pantechicons* and *Depôts*, that are as likely as not to be burned down to the ground while your goods are in them ; they'll be safer with me, I promise you, and I've a nice dry attic where I keep a lot of things for the dining-room, when he goes on his long journeys round the world. I suppose it is not quite a van-load you want to house ? "

" Oh no, only a few boxes of books and curiosities from my old home ; they will not take up much room."

" You just bring them here as soon as ever you like, and leave them just as long as you like. They wouldn't be safe, I suppose, if you leave them where you are now ? "

" Yes, they would be safe enough, but Mrs. Stewart objects to their remaining in her house ; and, as I shall probably never return to Kilmarnock Gardens, it is quite as well to make a thorough clearance while I am about it."

And a very suspicious moisture rose in Clare's eyes, not unnoticed by Mrs. Lock. " I am afraid they have not been over-good to you, my dear," she said. " One never knows one's friends till one is down in the world."

" No," replied Clare, bitterly ; " fair-weather friends are plentiful enough, no doubt. Henceforward, I do not mean to trust *anybody* : people who care not for me, but for my surroundings, are scarcely worth my notice. I have learned a great many lessons since my father died, Nancy ; I am a sadder, though a much wiser woman than I was a year ago."

" Ah, we all have to learn such lessons at some time or another, my dear young lady ; but don't learn to be mistrustful and suspicious ; it isn't good for one at your years, and it will always interfere with your happiness."

" *Happiness*, Nancy ! I have almost forgotten the meaning of it ;" and Clare smiled scornfully in the old woman's face. " I do not expect to be happy ; to be stupidly, doggedly content is all I can aspire to. ' Blessed are they who expect nothing, for they shall never be disappointed ! ' That is a sensible, good old saying."

" So it is to a person who has seen a good deal of life's *ups* and *downs*, but I don't like to hear it from your lips,

my dear ; and you don't speak like you did the last time I saw you. Why, you used to be as sweet as a nut, my dear, in the old days."

"And now I am as sour as vinegar and as bitter as wormwood. No, don't contradict, Nancy—I know what I am ; I feel something like a wasp or a hornet. I am not on good terms with anybody, least of all with myself. I have lived with unamiable and mean-minded people till I have learned the trick of being disagreeable, and feel at feud with the world at large."

"Deary me, Miss Clare, they must have been a nasty sort of people to make *you* speak in that tone. I am glad you are going away—you can hardly change for the worse, I should think. Is it to your grand relations you are going, my dear ?"

"Oh, no ; I am not at all sure that I really have any grand relations. I dare say they are all dead and buried by this time—certainly they will not acknowledge me. Very probably they know nothing of my existence, and you may be sure I shall never remind them of it. Did you ever hear of the Moorlandshire Darlings, Nancy ?"

"To be sure I did, Miss Clare—they were rather humble folk, weren't they ?"

"Very humble. I have always understood that they are quite uneducated and vulgar. How can they be anything else, buried in the country, seeing but their own rustic set from year to year, and living, I dare say, master and men, together in some huge barn of a kitchen ? My cousin's letter was not a very charming composition—I should say the literature of the Abbey Mill is confined to the Bible and the cookery-book, and, perhaps, the Pilgrim's Progress. Why, Cousin Margery only just knows how to write ; but there was one thing I rather liked—her welcome *seemed* sincere. It was *cordial*!"

"I am glad of that ; she may be a kind, motherly woman, even if she is not book-learned, and the country air will do you good. You look as if you wanted a change. You are as pale as if you'd just met a ghost."

"I am always meeting the ghost of old and happy days, Nancy. I sometimes think I must be wonderfully strong ;

I am sure I have had quite enough unhappiness to kill most people."

"Ah, my dear Miss Clare, people, as a rule, take a great deal of killing of *that* sort ; we can't always die just when it seems most convenient, when we are sick of life, and all its moil and toil, and unending contrariness. I suppose God knows what is best."

"It is as well to think so—if *we can*. Only, 'the best' is very trying, and bitterly disappointing to some people. Why should I have all this trouble and distress, and there are my old companions going on as joyously as ever. My cousins even—the Stewarts, I mean—soulless, mindless creatures as they are, and utter vulgarians into the bargain, have all they want, and meet with nothing but sympathy and kindness. It seems to me that prosperity *must* be best."

"It does seem so ; but, my dear young lady, '*seems*' is not always fact. I, too, have learned some lessons, Miss Clare—I've found out that God's ways are not as our ways. He has a plan of working things out for our good, so that affliction in the end brings peace and happiness. Perhaps you are being *taught*, Miss Clare dear."

"I am being taught, then, to hate life, and myself into the bargain."

"My dear, don't you think it is your pride that stands in the way of your happiness ? "

"Certainly *not* ! Nancy ; no one can be freer from pride than I am ; it is a hateful vice, and one I most thoroughly despise. I am faulty—very faulty, I know,—I am far from sweet-tempered—but I am not *proud*."

"Well, my dear, I don't know, but it strikes me that you are proud without being at all aware of it. I'm no scholar, Miss Clare ; I've been nothing better than a servant all my life—and I can't explain what I mean—I can't put into words what is in my mind. There are a good many sorts of pride, Miss Clare dear."

"I suppose there are ; but really, Nancy, I am too tired to argue. If I had any pride, it has been brought down, I can tell you. If insult and injury can make one meek, I have had enough of it—I ought to be the meekest person

in London. But we will talk no more, if you please, about myself—a more unsatisfactory subject we could not choose. I am to understand, then, that you will be so very good as to harbour my goods and chattels, such as they are, while I am away?"

"It won't be my fault if anything happens to them, Miss Clare. How long are you going to stay away?"

"I have not the least idea, Nancy. I have no home, remember—I am at everybody's mercy. These Moorlandshire Darlings may be poor and lowly, but still I am their—*poor relation*. We all know what that means. Perhaps they will expect me to make myself *generally useful*—in return for board and lodging."

"*That* would not do you so much harm, Miss Clare; it would not hurt you if you did soil your pretty white hands a little; there is nothing better for the mind or for the body than having plenty to do. Now, my dear, if I may make so bold as to give you a word of advice, I should say, don't set yourself against these country cousins of yours before you see them; people may be very nice and kind, though they can't write a good letter. And try to make the best of everything."

"I am not an optimist, Nancy."

"I don't know what that is, Miss Clare."

"I mean that I am not given to make the best of things; I am no philosopher. And now I really must run away; it is some distance from St. James's to North Tyburnia."

"You must have a bit of cake and a glass of wine."

"No, thank you; I have only just finished my tea, and it really is growing dusk."

"And when do you go, Miss Clare?"

"On Tuesday morning. I find, by taking a very early train, I can reach my destination in the evening. I shall send my boxes to you to-morrow, Nancy."

"And are there any young people in the family you are going to visit, my dear?"

"I think there are, indeed I am pretty sure that there are. Cousin Robert is rather older than papa, I fancy, but I know he had sons, and one daughter at least. And now good-bye, Nancy; thank you for your hospitality and kindness, and for

your advice as well ; they have all done me good. I feel much less hopeless than I did an hour ago."

"That is well, Miss Clare dear, and never forget that you have a true friend, though a very humble one, in Nancy Lock. Good-bye, and God bless you."

"Will any one else wish me God speed ?" thought Clare, as the crowded omnibus bore her away from Oxford Circus. "No, no one else in all the world cares in the least what becomes of me ; if the train I am to travel by next Tuesday came to grief, and there was a coroner's inquest on Clare Darlington, I do not suppose any creature would shed a tear, though perhaps uncle might wipe his eyes and say, 'Poor girl ! I wish we had not sent her away into Moorlandshire,' and then forget all about his unlucky guardianship."

From which reverie you may infer that Clare Darlington, so far from being an optimist, was a very decided *pessimist* ; that she had fallen into a very unwholesome state of mind, and was by no means disposed to take things by the smooth handle, or to regard them on the sunny side. The lines had not fallen to her in pleasant places, certainly, and she had met with a good deal of unkindness and injustice ; but it had never occurred to her that she was herself in fault—that he who will have friends must show himself friendly,—or that the pride which she indignantly repelled was really her besetting sin. For hers was a proud nature, and she was bred and nurtured in pride ; she inherited pride—not vanity, as I have observed before—but that subtle pride, which in all honesty ignores itself—that very climax and crown of pride, which, as Miss Jane Taylor informs us, "is too proud to own its pride." And this fatal defect had been fostered by her education ; she and the set to which she had all her life belonged were "*nous autres* :"—what to her were—or could be—the ignoble herd, who thought plenty of money, and abundance of good things, and the world's pomp and show, the *ne plus ultra* of enjoyment ?

Clare's few remaining days at Kilmarnock Gardens were very busy and wearying, but at the same time inexpressibly dreary. No one spoke to her, except in the most formal manner, and she scarcely troubled herself to reply when addressed. On the Saturday evening, she determined, if it

were possible, to take her meals apart from the family, for her uncle was going to Liverpool, and during his absence she knew perfectly well to what annoyances she would be subject, as Mrs. Stewart and her daughters had the detestable habit of "talking at" those with whom they were at feud. So much had been said between the ladies at dinner-time, that Clare was fain to petition for a cup of tea and a slice of bread-and-butter upstairs, fully endorsing the precept which teaches that "better is a dry morsel and quietness therewith, than a house full of sacrifices—or good cheer—with strife."

On Sunday morning she stayed at home, and went on with her arrangements with an aching head and a dull sense of misery at her heart ; she longed ardently for the hour of her departure to arrive ; she was tired of her wretched mode of life, and irritated almost past endurance at the pariah treatment to which she was condemned.

"I know it will all end, for better or for worse, on Tuesday morning," she said, as she ate some cold meat and bread in the solitary schoolroom ; the children and their governess dining downstairs on Sunday, in great state, immediately after morning service. "I dread to meet any of the family, lest I should lose all self-control, and be tempted to say what is in my mind, and what had better, for my own self-respect's sake, be left *unsaid*. It is only to have patience a few hours longer, for I shall be miles away before Mrs. Stewart and her daughters are out of their rooms, the morning after next. It would be a thousand pities to degrade myself to *their* level, even for a minute."

In the evening, Clare was so tired of loneliness that she determined to go to church ; not to St. Wilfrid's, where the Stewarts were supposed regularly to worship, and where the Honourable Mr. Delany intoned the prayers, and sometimes preached, but to some other church—*any* church so that it were a mile or two distant from Kilmarnock Gardens. She walked on, careless of the route she took, and without any clear idea of her destination, till she was tired, and then she turned into the first ecclesiastical-looking building she came to, and found that service had already commenced. The congregation were singing when she entered, and some one

at once showed her to a seat, and placed an open hymn-book in her hand.

She glanced involuntarily at the verse pointed out to her, and read—

“ Give me a calm, a thankful heart,
From every murmur free ;
The blessing of Thy grace impart,
And let me live to Thee. ”

“ Let the sweet hope that Thou art mine
My path of life attend,
Thy presence through my journey shine,
And crown my journey’s end.”

“ Can they *mean* what they are singing ? ” she asked herself, as the hymn went on ; “ do they really expect to go on their way calmly, and thankfully, and without a murmur ? Can it be that, after all, religion is a great reality ? that the true secret of happiness and content—of life itself—is what is called *faith in God* ? Well, of course it is ; I am not an infidel ; I do believe my Bible, I suppose ; but what is the use of accepting a truth that you do not *feel* ? Some of these people look as if they felt it all, as if they rested upon something unseen—as if they were really conscious of a Divine Presence.”

The hymn ceased, and there was the voice of prayer, not any of the prayers to which Clare was accustomed, and she listened dreamily, and with a languid curiosity to the speaker. She *liked* the prayer, she decided ; the man seemed to be in earnest, he was not merely pattering *words* ; and though there was something rather homely in his language, the petitions awakened in her heart a vague sense of her own urgent needs. And yet she did not join in the prayer ; she only listened as to mystic music, which soothed and yet perplexed her, though, under all the apathy to which she had surrendered herself, there was an undercurrent of strange, unwonted feeling. Still, in the same dull, lifeless way she heard the sermon, as if it had nothing to do with her ; it was a good sermon, she decided ; she did not think she had ever heard a better ; but she recognised from first to last no special message to herself.

And yet, strange to say, she remembered some of it

afterwards—especially that, just before the close, the preacher had said, addressing, as she supposed, the unconverted members of his congregation—" You will never be at peace till you accept Christ as your Saviour, your Lord, and your King. You will never find rest for your souls : you will remain *unsatisfied* till you call God *Father* ; till, as loving, trusting children, you give yourselves to Him ! "

" Can this be true ? Is there no rest and peace *out of God* —as they phrase it ? " she asked herself, as she walked slowly home through the crowded streets. " I cannot understand it ; there is something in it I cannot fathom."

Tuesday morning came, and before the sun was well risen she was preparing for her long journey. It was not yet six o'clock when she left the house in which she had been so unhappy, left it without one single regret, and, as she firmly believed, never to cross the threshold more.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MILLER'S FAMILY.

" I come from haunts of coot and hern,
I make a sudden sally ;
And sparkle out among the fern,
To bicker down a valley.

" I chatter, chatter as I flow
To join the brimming river ;
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on for ever."

THE long summer day was nearing its close when Clare Darlington reached the little roadside station, at which she finally quitted the rail. She had changed from train to train, and waited wearily on more than one unfamiliar platform ; and now she began to wonder what was to become of her, as it suddenly occurred to her that she

would have to accomplish the last few miles of her journey by road, and she had not requested her cousins to send a carriage to meet her.

She was very tired and dusty, and not a little hungry, for her midday repast had been of the slightest, and the cup of tea she had paid for at Darley Junction was boiling hot, and could not be persuaded to cool while the train waited. She was fain to take a draught of water, and go on her way unrefreshed. For the last few miles she had passed through very lovely scenery ; and now, as she stood, feeling most desolate, with her luggage around her, she perceived that she had arrived in the heart of a wild and beautiful hill-country. The little grey cottage that did duty as Woodhampton Station was covered with flowering creepers and splendid roses, the station master's little plot of peas and beans and onions flourished to perfection, but not a house of any kind was to be seen. It seemed to Clare as if she had all at once reached the boundaries of the habitable world.

There was none of the customary bustle of a railway platform, no one else had alighted, not an official was to be seen ; as the train disappeared, and the puff-puff of the engine ceased to be heard, all was perfect silence ; only the trees rustled gently in the soft evening breeze, a few belated bees hummed among the flowers, while the birds still continued to warble their vesper hymn. Just as Clare had begun to think that the place was uninhabited, the station-master made his appearance with an apology for his apparent negligence ; he had had promptly to reply to a telegram, and there was no one to work the wires save himself. He was master and man, he explained, and his wife, who was his sole assistant, had gone to spend the afternoon with a friend, and had not yet returned ; it was not very often that people found their way to Woodhampton Station.

“Have you a carriage that will take me to the Abbey Mill ? ” said Clare, when the man ceased to speak ; “I thought *perhaps* I should be met.”

“And if they knew you were coming, miss, I wonder they did not meet you, for there are no conveyances about here, except Farmer Worth’s carts and waggons, and we are quite a mile and a half from the village.”

"What shall I do then? I *could* walk, I suppose, but what is to become of all this luggage?"

"Indeed, I don't know, miss; we've only the trucks here, and there is no one to wheel them farther than the gate. As for your walking to Duston, it's too late to think of that, for it's a good eight, if not nine, miles; you would not get there to-night, and it's a wild way, and there are stepping-stones to cross on the other side of Woodhampton."

Clare was very much inclined to sit down upon her portmanteau and cry, for she felt utterly deserted and helpless. She stood in a despondent attitude before the station-master, who was not an unkindly man, though somewhat stolid and slow of thought; she could not think of any possible means of exodus from that quiet, lonely place; her only alternative seemed to be taking shelter in one of the sheds close at hand; and there was a rude sort of waiting-room, in which one might at least be defended from the weather. "Could I not stay here all night?" she was beginning, when the station-master lifted his hand and exclaimed, "There's some one coming; I hear the sound of wheels."

"I hear nothing but a murmur like falling water, and the rustling of the trees," said Clare mournfully, when she had listened for half a minute.

But the next moment she heard distinctly the approach of a vehicle coming rapidly down the hill, and hope revived; in a few seconds more, she could see a good-sized wagonette, drawn by two horses, almost at the bottom of the winding road opposite. "Here you are!" cried the station-master quite exultingly; "yon's the Abbey Mill carriage, and the miller himself is driving. The Darlings always do meet their folk, though it isn't often they have a visitor; I thought they'd be sure to come, sooner or later, if you'd written time enough; they are only a bit behind, you see."

Even as the station-master finished speaking, a fine, stalwart, middle-aged man jumped from the box, and ran hurriedly towards them; he was dressed as an ordinary country gentleman, and was *not* powdered all over with flour, as Clare had fully expected to behold him. "Bless me! and you've been waiting. I set out just five minutes later than I intended, and then Prince got a stone in his

shoe in crossing the brook, and I had to stop and put matters right. How are you, my dear?"

"Quite well, but very tired," replied Clare, plaintively, yet relieved to find her relative so far removed from the mealy clodhopper she had pictured to herself. He looked quite a gentleman,—very much like a country squire, in fact; and though he spoke rather loudly he was tolerably free from the provincial accent she had dreaded.

"Poor little girl; you do look tired," said the miller, as he bestowed a hearty kiss on his young cousin's trembling lips: "and we have a longish drive before us. I wish sometimes we were a little nearer the station; but we don't trouble the rail much, except for the grain and the flour, and that comes to us mostly from the other line beyond Allan Bridge. Now, my dear, all your boxes are in the trap; will you go inside, or sit on the box by me? I'd advise the box-seat, for you see your road before you, and you get less jolted."

And so Clare was handed up to the box; the miller satisfied himself that the luggage was safely stowed away in the wagonette itself; then took his seat, gathered up the reins, and with a cheery word to his horses—a strawberry roan and a dappled grey—began to ascend the wooded hill that led up to the little village of Woodhampton. Up hill and down dale they went, sometimes slowly, sometimes at full speed, and always cautiously, for the road was not of the best, even for country steeds, and it was almost dark here and there, where the shadow of the large trees was deepest. Clare could discern but little of the scenery through which she was being carried, for the light was dim, even on the uplands, though the sunset radiance yet lingered on the western skies. She knew that they followed the course of a river, after leaving to the right the village of Woodhampton, for she could hear the rush of waters and the tumble of the stream over rocks or boulders, and once there was a great roar that seemed to shake the very ground.

"That's Lillaby Force," said the miller, as he stopped his horses for a moment. "We call a waterfall in these parts a *force*, which, perhaps, you may know. There isn't a

grander force in the country, though it isn't much known, being miles and miles out of the regular tourists' tracks. But listen, isn't it fine—that solemn thunder? There's nothing like it, except the sound of the sea, and the roar of the winter winds in the tops of the pines."

"Yes, it is beautiful!" replied Clare, thinking that there must be some poetry in the soul of her rustic cousin, who could thus be roused to enthusiasm by the sights and sounds of Nature. She had heard nothing like it during her residence in Kilmarnock Gardens; no one there cared for anything "grander" than outside show and worldly position. The two Mary Janes would certainly have cried out at the "awful din," and Uncle John would have exclaimed, "Dear me, what a *dreadful noise!*!"

"Are we very near the fall?" Clare asked, as they drove quietly away along a stretch of smooth and even green-sward; and her cousin answered, "We are about a quarter of a mile from the basin of the force; there is not so much water now as there is sometimes. In the winter nights you can hear it—I don't know how far—beyond Allan Bridge, I know, and that is five miles from Duston."

"Duston is where you live, is it not?"

"Well! we belong to Duston, I suppose; our parish church is Duston Church, but we are a good way beyond the last house in the village—we are on the banks of the Allan Water, you know; Duston can't boast of more than a bit of a brook, that very often runs dry in the height of summer. The Allan Water is always a fine deep stream, and a mile above the mill-dam it's broad enough to sail a fleet. No miller in the country is better off for mill-power than I am, Miss Clara."

"*Clare* is my name, not Clara. Papa would never allow me to be called anything but Clare; they were always calling me *Clary* at Kilmarnock Gardens, to my infinite annoyance. Please to call me Clare, Cousin Robert."

"Very well, missy, we'll call you what you like, and Clare is a pretty, simple name, and means clear, and bright, and transparent; if you are true to your name, so much the better for yourself. There! that's the tower of Duston Church; you can just see it through that break of the

woods—like a dark line against that strip of amber-coloured sky—now, our road is straight before us, and we shall be at home before long."

The clocks were striking ten as the travellers drove through Duston, which seemed to consist of one long straggling street of humble houses, in which there was no sign of life, save what flickered faintly from the windows of the upper chambers, where the good people were going to bed. Only the public-house was open, and that was shutting up. A few minutes more, and they left the beaten road and turned into a narrow lane, that ended in fields, across which they drove.

"There is a better way than this to the Mill," said Cousin Robert, as the horses stumbled, and the carriage gave a lurch, "but this is the direct way from the village, and saves us a quarter of a mile, and I fancy you are pretty well tired out, missy ; you must have been up betimes this morning?"

"I was up with the sun, Cousin Robert ; when the clocks struck six I had left North Tyburnia well behind me. Yes ; I am *very* tired, and I think I am hungry."

"Did you get any dinner ?"

"I got two dry biscuits and a very stale sandwich that tasted chiefly of mustard and sawdust. I had the choice between that and greasy-looking sausage-rolls and suspicious pies."

"Why did you not carry a nice little luncheon with you, child ? I should have thought you were traveller enough not to depend on refreshment-rooms."

"No one thought of it, I suppose ; at least, no orders were given, and only one servant got up to get my breakfast, and to see me off."

"Rather thoughtless of your London cousins, I must say. My Margery would have packed you up quite a dainty little basket ; but here we are."

Clare peered through the gloom, and perceived a man standing at the horses' heads. There was a great noise of tumbling waters all around ; there was a heavy scent of flowers, and straight before her there was a large low house, in which were several lighted windows. The front door

was open, and from it cheerful gleams shone out into the darkness ; before she could prepare to descend from her lofty perch, Cousin Robert had lifted her to the ground as easily as if she were a four years' child, and she found herself straightway in the arms of a stout, motherly woman, who was doubtless the "Margery" of the one epistle Clare had received from the Abbey Mill. There were other persons in the background—all cousins, she concluded—as kisses both male and female were showered upon her ; and then she was led into a wide, comfortable room, and put into an easy-chair by the fire, which had been lighted, as she soon discovered, for her sole accommodation. "These summer evenings were sometimes a little chill," Cousin Margery was saying, "and a bit of fire looked cheery after a long journey, and she was sure Clare must be cold from very weariness."

"And half-starved, too," said the miller. "They sent the poor child out without even a bun or a sandwich ! What have you got to give us, mother ? I am pretty sharp-set, I can tell you ; I had but a snack at tea-time."

The "snack" had really consisted of half-a-dozen slices of thick bread-and-butter, washed down by two good cups of tea—trifles which were apparently of no account at all, judging from the supper now consumed. But Clare begged that she might go straight to bed, as she was too tired, too exhausted to eat, and the sight of the cold beef and ham, and the huge savoury pie, and the heap of home-made custards and cheesecakes, actually repelled her. She looked so very white and wan that Mrs. Darlington whispered to one of her daughters, and the next minute Clare was on her way to her bedroom, escorted by her cousins, with the promise of something nice and warm being sent up to her after she was undressed.

Two tall, handsome girls played the part of handmaids ; one unpacked her valise, and got out all that would be needed for the night ; the other helped her to undress, without entering into much conversation, or troubling her to answer a single question.

Presently Cousin Margery herself appeared with a little tray, on which were displayed delicate slices of thin bread-

and-butter, two or three slices of chicken, and a tumbler of steaming negus, all of which she insisted upon being taken before she would leave the room. Then, after having been accommodated with a night-light, which Cousin Margery assured her guest was a necessity in a strange place, and peremptorily desired not to get up to breakfast, the elder lady kissed her in right motherly fashion, and bade her "good-night" and "God bless her;" while the two girls kissed her rather shyly, and "hoped she would sleep well after her long journey."

"And remember, Edith and I are close at hand," said the younger of the two. "We put you in this room, rather than in the proper guest-chamber, because we hope you will stay a very long time, and we girls thought it would be so nice to be all together at this end of the house."

And then Clare was left alone to go to sleep as fast as she could; but now she perversely felt quite wide awake, and she lay a long time—half the night as it seemed to her—with the roar of the railway-engine still in her ears, and a kind of kaleidoscopic view before her closed eyelids of all the adventures of the day. She could hardly believe that she was two hundred miles from London, and that she would not be roused in the morning by the familiar street sounds of North Tyburnia. It was so very still; at first there were muffled noises about the house, as of the family retiring to rest; but ere long all was hushed in profoundest silence, only broken by the murmur of the river, and the low thunder of the falling waters.

"I have not felt so peaceful—so rested, for many a day!" thought Clare, as she lay in the depths of the snow-white pillows of finest linen, that smelled sweetly of lavender and rose-leaves; the bed-curtains were of a pretty, light rosebud chintz, and everything in the room, seen in the dim shadowy twilight of the carefully shaded night-lamp, looked fresh and charming. "They are kinder to me than the Stewarts ever were," she mentally resumed; "Cousin Margery may perhaps be uneducated,—she must be, indeed, or she would never have written that letter,—but I feel as if I could take to her, and trust her as a mother; and those girls, too, are *nice*, and have gentle, pleasing manners. Shall I ever forget

my first evening with Mary Jane and Sarah Anne, and that awkward, blundering Caroline? Shall I ever forget the fine-lady airs of Mrs. Stewart? I will never again call her *aunt*, though she is my own uncle's wedded wife. No! I can't be worse off in this house; whether I have improved my position remains to be seen; so far, I am rather agreeably disappointed; but how will it be when the novelty of the change has worn off, and when the pleasant summer days are over?—for the idea of the country in winter is simply detestable. But perhaps I may get away before then; in Louise d'Estrelle's last letter she did say something about my paying them a visit in Paris—though it was rather vague, and I suppose I had better not count upon it."

And then Clare's memory wandered away into the past, and a thousand sweet, yet sad reminiscences swept across her brain as she recalled the happy time when her father was living, and she was the petted, *fêté* mistress of their gay, luxurious little home in the Champs-Elysées. Oh! the brilliant circle, the select coteries, the life of careless ease, the never-ceasing round of pleasure that was hers in those blissful days, when in retrospect, it seemed to her that she had everything that heart could crave; she had forgotten all the petty vexations and small trials of those rosy hours; she did not yet know that the past is always glorified in the present, that the *afterglow* is sometimes fairer than the sunset itself, that there is a mystic light in the *Abendroth* that is never seen in the garish light of common day.

And so Clare tossed about, musing regretfully on her past, yet thankful for her late escape from the bondage that had grown so intolerable, and wondering what sort of story was written on the page next to be turned in the record of her life, till the short night was over, and the dawn-clouds were reddening over the hills that shut in the peaceful valley of the Allan Water. At last, still brooding over the chances that might befall her in this calm retreat, she lapsed into unconsciousness, and slept profoundly, till, starting up, she saw that the sun was shining brightly into her chamber, and that Edith was standing at the foot of her bed with a bunch of roses and jasmine in her hand.

"Is it late? Is it long past breakfast-time?" asked Clare, feeling instinctively that her slumber had lasted for some hours; "why did you not awake me?"

"Because mother said we were on no account to disturb you; you must have your sleep out after yesterday's fatigue; I have been in twice before, but you did not hear me—now I am sure you want your breakfast."

"Have you had yours?"

"Hours ago! It is just eleven o'clock."

"Eleven o'clock! How could you let me sleep so long? But I am not always so lazy."

"It is not lazy to get comfortably rested, and we wondered whether you would sleep well, for mother said she was sure you were *over-tired*, and would very likely lie awake from mere reaction."

"As indeed I did! But I have had a beautiful long sleep, and am quite ready to get up; I shall soon be dressed."

"You must have your breakfast first; it is the mother's command, and her word is law in this house; lie still, and you shall have it in five minutes." And in less than the promised time Edith reappeared with a most temptingly arranged breakfast-tray. Clare was much astonished at the dainty napery, the pretty Worcester china, and the little old-fashioned melon-shaped tea-pot and cream-pot of exquisitely chased silver. And the repast itself; she thought she had never enjoyed a meal so much in all her life before. What cream! What fragrant coffee! What a delicious new-laid egg! What a crisp, yet juicy rasher! What delicate strips of toast, and, above all, what wonderful bread-and-butter! Clare had quite recovered her appetite, and she could appreciate to the full the homely luxuries of the Abbey Mill.

When she had finished, she looked all round the room, which she could see was prettily though very simply furnished; the handiwork of refined taste was visible everywhere. Finally, her gaze rested admiringly on the fair girlish face before her, for Edith Darlington was very handsome, and of imposing presence, for so young a person.

"Have you quite finished breakfast?" she asked presently. "Tessie will bring you some hot water when I ring the bell;

she would not allow me the privilege of waiting on you, all by myself."

"Who is Tessie? Did I see her last night?"

"Surely you did; she unpacked your valise and your dressing-case, while I helped you undress. She scarcely spoke, I think, for she is very shy, is my sister Tessie; but you will like her very much when you know her better. Tessie is a darling!"

"I have no doubt she is; but is her name really Tessie?"

"No; that is her pet name; she was christened Theresa, after a favourite sister of my father's, who died long ago. Tessie is scarcely seventeen, and I am turned twenty."

"Rather younger than I am," responded Clare, feeling wonderfully interested in these new relations of hers; "but was there not another girl in the supper-room last night?"

"Yes, my youngest sister, Madeline, commonly called 'Lina.' She is only fourteen, and her regular bed-time is nine o'clock, but she stayed up last night to welcome you. Then there are the boys, Dick and Ralph, both older than I am, and Philip Warner, an orphan, and a distant relation of mother's. He has lived with us ever since I can remember, and we count him as a third brother. There are six of us, you perceive. Now you are come, we shall be able to say 'We are Seven.'"

"And whatever do you do with yourselves in this lonely place? Does anything ever happen?"

Edith opened her fine eyes in undisguised astonishment. "Do with ourselves!" she re-echoed. "Why, we never have an idle hour; and, do things happen?—yes; all sorts of things. The bees swarm, the chickens are hatched, the cows calve, the lavender and the rose-leaves want gathering, herbs must be dried for the winter; to say nothing of hay-harvest and corn harvest, and apple gathering, and the storing of fruit generally."

"But those are *occupations*. Have you no recreations, no pleasures, such as visiting, or concerts, or lectures?"

"Do you know, I never thought about it, but I do believe our occupations are our recreations. We have a nice little farm, and Tessie and I manage the dairy and the poultry between us. We are both very fond of the live creatures;

we each have our pet cow. Mine is the greatest beauty, and as gentle as the old house-cat ; and I quite enjoy feeding the calves—dear little things ! All our animals know us, and come to our call. Then we take long walks, and rides—of course you ride, and must have your own pony. And, oh, Clare, *do* you understand botany ? Tessie and I have got some books, and some one we know has lent us an old *Flora*; but we are sometimes in lamentable uncertainty when we set ourselves to *name* our specimens. Have you taken up the study at all ? ”

And Clare was able to answer that she had given some attention to the science, and would be very much pleased to take it up again, in a country that to all appearance was rich in wild flowers ; and Edith hinted that they would all be very glad if she would give Lina a lesson now and then in French and German ; for Clare spoke both languages, and naturally with a pure accent, while the sisters at the Mill had never left their native country, and, indeed, had not been fifty miles from home.

CHAPTER V.

UNDER THE CHESTNUT SHADE.

“ We bless Thee for Thy peace, O God,
 Deep as the unfathomed sea ;
 Which falls like sunshine on the road
 Of those who trust in Thee.
 That peace which flows serene and deep,
 A river in the soul,
 Whose banks a living verdure keep,
 God’s sunshine o’er the whole.”

QUITE well and brisk as Clare reported herself on that first morning, she was nevertheless languid, and what Cousin Margery called “ out of sorts ” till quite the end of the week. She had been severely tried, and the

strain upon her for some time past had been more than she had any idea of ; it was only when the stern necessity of self-control and unwonted prudence was over, that she knew how heavy the burden had been, and recognised to the full the bitterness of the lot she had sustained.

The final indignities she had suffered, the heartlessness that left her to make all preparations for her long journey, not even inquiring if she possessed the necessary funds—had put her on her mettle, and roused all her pride to the utmost, lest those she hated and despised should imagine she was humbled at last ; and she had struggled to bear herself quite calmly, and to demonstrate by her self-possession and indomitable composure how little she felt the malice of her ignoble kindred. And she had succeeded so well, that not one of the family imagined her to be really vanquished ; even the servants, who, of course, had talked matters over among themselves, had agreed that Miss Darlington was shamefully treated, but that she had pluck to carry her through anything.

But now, the anxious journey being accomplished, and the strict watch over herself slackened, she began to feel what the tension had been ; her nerves became thoroughly unstrung, and she felt as if the smallest exertions were too much for her. So, after all, she came down that morning a very pale and fragile-looking Clare, too weary to continue the unpacking which she had vigorously commenced, and feebly apologising for her very late appearance ; for it was almost her cousin's early dinner-hour. Mrs. Darlington was shocked to perceive how wan and exhausted the poor girl really was, and she attributed it all to natural delicacy, and the fatigues of travel, and gently chided her for getting up at all ; she ought not to have attempted to come downstairs before five o'clock, which was their usual tea-time.

And Clare was relegated, notwithstanding her strenuous opposition, to the best parlour, where she could lie comfortably on the large sofa without being disturbed, and where her dinner could be brought to her in solitary state, for it was not to be thought of, Cousin Margery said, that she should join the noisy family party till she was quite herself again. The best parlour would in most houses have been

styled the “drawing-room,” for it was large and handsomely furnished ; but the Mill House had never rejoiced in such an apartment ; there was the dining-room, in which the family took their meals ; the workroom, where the sewing-machine lived, and where certain domestic arrangements were carried out ; the schoolroom, where Madeline had her lessons, and the girls practised ; and besides the “parlour,” another room, which Clare did not see for several days, and which she was very much astonished to discover—*the library*.

This was not a spacious room, but the walls were well-lined with books, most of them worn and rather ancient in appearance, and very few of them modern, or showy-looking ; though there were some recent volumes, a good display of English classics, and a pretty fair collection of standard works by the best authors. It was not till Saturday, when Clare was well enough to go in and out and walk in the beautiful, old-fashioned garden, that she found to her surprise that she had come to live in an old Manor House, or rather in the remains of a fine Abbey, which had been converted into a domestic residence, and adjoined the mill which had once been the property of the Cistercian monks. The mill itself was venerable as to its foundations, though much of it had been rebuilt within the last thirty years, and most of the recent improvements in plant and machinery had been gradually introduced by Mr. Darlington and his father. It was connected with the dwelling-house by a long passage, which was very little used except by the master himself ; the mill-dam was large and well constructed, and emptied itself in the river Allan, which, after tumbling from the hills in the shape of a frisky mountain torrent, flowed placidly enough through the green-wooded plateau or upland valley in which stood the mill, and round the village or “town” of Duston, whence it descended wildly and noisily into the rushing stream Clare had remarked on the night of her arrival—a stream which a few miles farther on widened into a tidal estuary and presently lost itself in the sea.

The Home Farm, as it was called to distinguish it from another and larger farm at some distance, consisted principally of solid old buildings which had once belonged to

the ancient Abbey ; and being so far from any market-town, the miller's family depended upon this farm for all possible kinds of produce. The monks' kitchen garden supplied fruit, vegetables, and herbs in abundance, and Tessie's wonderful apiary was quite a source of income.

Mrs. Darlington was at first seriously concerned on Clare's account, for she was so listless and taciturn, had so little appetite, and seemed startled and nervous when addressed ; she was beginning to fear that her young relative was hypochondriacally inclined, especially as she had more than once found her in tears which she evidently wished to conceal from observation, and she was just going to speak to her husband on the expediency of consulting their old friend the doctor at Allan Bridge, when the invalid suddenly improved, and manifested some desire to go out into the sunshine. Tessie proposed that the sofa should be carried on to the lawn and placed in the shadow of the great sycamore that was accounted one of the glories of the Abbey Mill ; but her mother thought it would be better to let her guest stroll about the grounds at will, resting whenever she chose on one of the many seats that were at her disposal.

Saturday was a beautiful day, quite warm enough to render sitting in the open air safe and agreeable, and Clare was delighted with the well-kept garden, so bright with summer flowers, and so well-shaded by fine umbrageous trees. There were some rustic chairs and a table, under a spreading horse-chestnut, that grew upon a mount sloping gradually down towards the water ; the grass was green as emeralds, yet plentifully sprinkled with daisies, and the banks of the river, which there formed itself into a little shallow bay, almost covered with splendid water-lilies, were gay with purple loosestrife, and golden flags, and fragrant with masses of the spicy, foam-like meadow-sweet.

"Now," said Mrs. Darlington, as she saw Clare looking a little wistfully at this pleasant resting-place, "would it not be nice for you and Tessie to sit there and pick some of the fruit that I am waiting to preserve ? The last two days have ripened the currants wonderfully, and many of them are just ready to be gathered. I don't like

preserving on Saturday, but if I wait till Monday they will be spoilt. Edith is engaged with Lina in the schoolroom, and I never like to interfere with lessons, if I can help it. Tessie is busy now in the workroom stripping currants, but I will send her out here, if you will help her ; it will not tire you, I think, and I shall be so glad to get on with the boiling, so as to finish before tea. Father always likes me to be ready to talk to him on Saturday evenings."

Of course, Clare could only say that she would be very happy to pick the fruit—she supposed Tessie would show her how to do it ; at which Mrs. Darlington laughed, and told her that she would not need much *showing*, and she was to remember that the pickers were always licensed to eat as much of the ripe fruit as they wished for. Strange as it may seem, Clare had never picked a pound of fruit in all her life, though, of course, she had eaten plenty of currants and raspberries prepared for the table, and also as dessert ; but her acquaintance with culinary science was so small that she had no idea of the utter simplicity of the task before her. Domestic economy had formed no item in the elaborate education that had fallen to her share ; her father had always been able to secure the services of an accomplished housekeeper, and Mrs. Stewart and her daughters were far too much of fine ladies to manifest an interest in anything so vulgar as *cookery*, even in its most delicate shape ; for the days of *Buckmaster* were not yet, and "Cookery-classes" were an institution still unknown.

"Then sit down," was Mrs. Darlington's conclusion, "and I will send Tessie and the fruit, and you had better wear one of our kitchen aprons—it would be a pity to stain that nice grey gingham. Let me see what a good workwoman you will make."

Left alone, Clare sat comfortably under the leafy shade, and pensively contemplated the expanding lilies, and "the brimming river," over which a kingfisher was gaily flitting. How delicious was the pure air, how soothing the silence, broken only by the low rustle of the trees, the splash of the great wheel, and the hum of the busy mill behind her. She rather liked the situation, even though she was going to pick fruit like a servant. It would be a new experience at

any rate, and it would while away the time which so often hung heavily on her hands, besides which she would have Tessie's companionship ; and though very little conversation had passed between them, she liked this pretty cousin very much, for she had been extremely kind and attentive during her short seclusion, and her voice was sweet, her manner gentle, and her ways quiet and unobtrusive. And Clare, as her strength returned, felt her curiosity revive, and she wanted to know all about this rustic family of which she was now an accredited member.

A very few minutes she mused and watched the king-fisher, as he skimmed the crystal wave, and then she saw Tessie coming quickly towards her. She carried with her a large dish of juicy, red, transparent currants, and she was followed by a young maid-servant who had charge of two capacious basins—a vessel for the reception of the useless stalks, and several other articles that would be required. Tessie was radiant with pleasure, it would be so much nicer sitting out here in the cool shade than in the solitary work-room which was always so hot in the mornings.

Then she arranged her properties, bidding Clare observe the coarse towel and the impromptu finger-glasses, which would be so useful for the currant-stained fingers ; and also handing her the large apron which was to protect her dress. Clare donned this novel addition to her toilet, and thought how curious she looked. Nevertheless, the unwonted experience amused her ; it was almost "as good as a play" to manipulate that rich, ripe fruit, out of doors, and with a nice little luncheon of almond-cake and lemonade all ready for consumption when desired. And overhead was a joyous lark, trilling and shaking better than any *prima donna*, while the thrushes in the nearest thicket kept up one unending chorus.

Clare was soon deftly picking away ; she filled her charger quite as rapidly as Tessie, and found it rather agreeable than otherwise to be usefully occupied. But the girls worked almost silently till two piles of the luscious fruit stood before them ; then Tessie said, "There is plenty now to keep mother at work in the kitchen ; let us stop a bit, and have some cake : I am really hungry."

And when Clare came to think of it, she was hungry too, and the lemonade proved to be very refreshing. As they resumed their work more leisurely after the refreshment, Tessie said, rather shyly, "I hope you like the country, cousin! I hope you will not find us *very* dull! We all want to keep you here a long time."

"It is very sweet and quiet," replied Clare. "I had no notion you had such a charming place; the air is simply delicious, and the scenery is lovely. I had not fancied that a *flour-mill* could be so picturesquely situated."

"Well! there are mills *and* mills, I suppose; it is a beautiful river, I think, our own dear Allan Water. And then the Abbey ruins and the remains of the old house make it so much more romantic; you have not seen much of the place yet, cousin; perhaps if you rest a little this afternoon, you will be well enough to go into the cloisters this evening. If you had only come two months earlier, you would have seen our apple-trees in blossom; it was a sight indeed; and we have what we call the cloister-orchard—a lot of old crooked trees, heavy with fruit in the autumn, that were planted ages ago, among the graves of the old monks. People come to see the ruins sometimes, but not often; we seem almost out of the world, and yet we are only five miles from Allan Bridge."

"Is Allan Bridge a town of any importance?"

"Oh, yes, it is a very large town. And yet, no; father says it is not much of a town. I dare say you will not be struck with its size. I forget that you come from London, of the immensity, of which, I suppose, I can form no idea. I should like to see Westminster Abbey and the Crystal Palace. Of course *you* know both very well?"

"Yes, very well. I have lived nearly all my life in the neighbourhood of London, and in Paris; and I have travelled besides, both in England, including Scotland, and abroad. My father and I spent a whole winter in Rome, and we had planned to go to St. Petersburg, but—but he faded, and grew old all of a sudden, and the journey was put off, and put off, and—we *never* went."

"It was most sad to be disappointed for such a cause, but I think you have been a very happy girl, Clare. How

many beautiful recollections you must have. To think you have really seen *Rome*, the Coliseum, and St. Peter's—and that wonderful Campagna that I have read so often about. Clare, I almost wish I were you."

"Don't wish that, Tessie; the remembrance of past happiness only plunges one into deeper and more hopeless sorrow. Alas! for the days that are no more; the days that can never come again!"

"But," said Tessie very earnestly, "though the same days can never come again, because the past *is* the past, cannot there be other days yet to come, still sweeter and brighter than those that are gone?"

Clare let her hands drop in her lap, and sadly shook her head. "Do you know," she said, "that the great poet says—

"A sorrow's crown of sorrow
Is remembering happier things'?"

"Ah, yes! Tennyson said it was *the truth*. He was referring, of course, to Dante's '*Nessun maggior dolor*.'"

"Are you an Italian scholar?" asked Clare, with some surprise.

"Oh, no! I cannot call myself that, but Edith and I have hammered away at *Vergani's* grammar for the last two years, and we can just manage the easy passages of Dante—of course, with the help of a dictionary; but I never heard a word of Italian spoken in my life, and I suppose I never shall, unless indeed you speak it, as I daresay you do."

"I can manage to make myself pretty well understood, and I can read Italian easily enough, except, indeed, Dante, who is what *Goethe* is in the German, and what our Shakspeare must be to foreigners. Do you know anything of German, Tessie?"

"Just enough to make me long to know a great deal more. But we have really had proper lessons in German, as well as in French; there are sometimes *masters*—professors, I ought to say—at Allan Bridge, but they never stay more than a few months; they find a scarcity of pupils."

"And you are musical, are you not? I know that little Line practises, and I heard one of you singing very nicely last night."

"It was Edith ; father likes her to sing to him in the evening, especially in the twilight. We have allowed our pianos to be very silent since you came, for mother was afraid we should disturb you. We thought, in the parlour, you would hardly hear the schoolroom piano, played softly."

"How very kind and thoughtful you have all been to me. But, Tessie, I cannot quite understand you and Edith ; you play and sing, and I daresay you draw ; and you read French, and German, and Italian ; and yet you are content to be buried alive here, and do all sorts of housework. And you are both very pretty ; I can fancy you would look beautiful well dressed."

"Edith would, I am sure ; she is like a splendid picture ; I often say so. But why should we not be happy here, though ? We are sometimes taunted with being out of the world ; we have plenty to do, and get plenty of time in which to enjoy ourselves, and we have everything we really want, and father and mother are the most indulgent of old folks. And we all love each other ; what more can we desire ?"

"Nothing, indeed ! 'A contented mind is a perpetual feast,' some wiseacre says ; only, Tessie, it takes a great deal to satisfy some people, and some are so very easily pleased."

"That must be an advantage. Both father and mother have always tried to teach us to find enjoyment in little common things. 'There is a drop of honey in every flower,' I have heard mother say, and there's no day quite without its sunshine."

"There I must disagree with your mother," said Clare, very decidedly. "She is older than I am, thirty years older, I daresay, but she has seen less of life ; she can know little of disappointment, and of the pain of loss, in this quiet nook. The world may rave, and the leaders of society may fret and fume ; ay, and the followers, too ; vanity and vexation of spirit may darken the close of many a summer day that dawns in hope's golden light ; but what can any of *you* know of such buffettings—such weariness of heart, such sickness of despair ?"

"We know more of sorrow than you imagine," said Tessie, gravely ; "suffering and death come to the most peaceful

homes ; we have our graves in Duston Churchyard, two sisters and a little brother, and grandpapa and grandmamma are there. And our mother was very ill, and we felt sure she would leave us, and go to them ; and only a few years ago, the father lost a large sum of money, through a fire at Allan Bridge. Oh, yes, cousin, we know what it is to grieve ; who does not ? And yet we have never had to grieve as those without hope ; there has always been, as mother says, the bow in the cloud. And then there is always the peace *that passeth understanding*—the peace that the world can never take away, any more than it can give it.”

“The peace that passeth all understanding,” repeated Clare, slowly. “Of course, there *is* such a peace, for the Bible speaks of it ; but, do you know, Tessie, it never has seemed to me *a reality*. Where does it come from ? Who —*what gives it ?*”

“God gives it—God, our Father—no one—nothing else—ever does, or can.”

“That is the orthodox reply, of course. Then why do not *all* Christian people have it ? All of us, who are not heathen or infidel, call God ‘our Father.’ I can remember saying ‘Our Father, which art in heaven’ morning and night, when I was such a mite that I could not speak plainly, and always called God ‘Dod.’”

“I suppose one would be counted *a heretic*, if one did not own God as ‘*our Father*’ ; but that is a very different thing, I fancy, from feeling Him to be so ; and from loving Him and trusting Him, as children should love and trust. It gives me a great deal of peace and comfort to know that my earthly father is at hand, when I am in any difficulty, or if I feel at all lonely, because I know him, and how much he loves me and cares for me ; but it would not be so, if he were no more to me than *a name* ; if I had never seen him, or felt any filial tenderness towards him ; if, suppose, I had always believed myself to be an orphan, and he came suddenly home from India, or America, and told me I was his child—and I knew it was the truth—yet knew nothing of his looks and ways. I might have a sort of feeling that he was my parent, and that I owed him duty accordingly ; but I could not depend on him, I should not find any

happiness in him, my heart would not go out to him ; I should not feel *the peace* of resting on him."

"And you would infer that God is no more to me than a lawful Ruler whom I do not know?"

"Oh, no, cousin ; I infer nothing of the sort, I only tried to answer your question. I wish, though, you had asked mother, she would have explained herself so much more clearly. I know she believes that we all have to *find* peace some time or another ; and that, till we do find this peace which the world cannot give, we have no resting-ground for our feet—no confidence that all will be well with us, now, and for evermore ; in short, no true happiness."

"Tell me, Tessie, have *you* found this peace ?"

"Yes," replied Tessie, very shyly, but as one who is bound to bear witness. And her eyes filled with tears—happy, thankful tears, Clare felt certain ; and she remembered a text that she had once heard—she did not know where, though, at the time, it had awakened a strange feeling, half of wonder, half of aspiration, in her heart—"Your joy no man taketh from you !"

She was so lost in thought that she did not hear Tessie called from the house ; she did not take any note of her rising and carrying away the great pile of juicy currants ; but she felt instinctively that she was alone. And, as she sat, the bright sunlight faded, heavy, dark clouds gathered and rolled upwards from the horizon, and over the hushed woods came a solemn, pealing voice—the tempest was at hand.

"So it has always been," said Clare, mournfully and feeling suddenly sick at heart ; "a little light and sweetness, and then the shade—a little brightness and warmth, and then *the storm*. All is vanity and vexation of spirit."

And still she gazed, with hot, tearless eyes, into the deepening gloom, and her soul was sad within her. Suddenly, there arose a low moaning breeze, as from the placid bosom of the Allan Water ; there was a vivid, blinding flash, a roar of thunder, and then a heavy downpour from the edge of the sullen cloud, and Clare managed to get pretty well drenched, although she rushed into the house with all possible expedition.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GREAT STORM.

“The God of Glory thundereth.”

“This awful God is ours,
Our Father and our Friend.”

THERE was no more thunder or lightning at that time ; the storm rolled over, and was supposed to be heavy somewhere else, but the rain did not cease ; the mists descended from the hill-tops, and, by dinner-time, it was declared to be a hopelessly wet day ; there could be no exploring of the ruins that evening, and the *al fresco* tea, that Edith and Tessie had planned, could not possibly take place. Clare began to be afraid that a long and dreary afternoon was before her.

At dinner she made the acquaintance of the male cousins she had scarcely seen on the night of her arrival. Dick and Ralph were good-looking, fair-haired young men, older than their sisters—excellent miller’s men, no doubt, but rather slow of speech, and decidedly sheepish in their bearing ; when they had decided that the storm “had passed over Reacham way,” and would very likely return with renewed violence some hours later, they had nothing more to say, and they addressed themselves sturdily to the roast veal and young potatoes before them, scarcely lifting their eyes from their well-filled plates. They were formally polite to the new London cousin, but were far too bashful to pay her much attention, or else they were too much occupied with the good fare upon the table ; and, during the second course, which consisted of raspberry-tart and rich custard, they seemed wholly intent on doing their duty as healthy consumers—certainly they did full justice to the meal.

There was yet another young man, to whom it somehow happened that Clare was not introduced, but she readily understood that he must be the Philip Warner of whom

Edith had spoken ; he was not at all like the fair-skinned, sun-burnt Darlingtons of the Mill, for he was very dark, with an expression which might be indicative either of melancholy or ill-temper ; on the whole, he had what Clare called a Vandyke countenance. And at first she thought she liked him ; he had a high-bred air, she fancied, as he entered the room and took his accustomed seat by Madeline, which happened to be exactly opposite her own ; but, when dinner was ended, she had so far changed her opinion as to pronounce him *a bear!* He was not silent, as were the other young men ; he had plenty to say for himself, and he said it as one who expects to be listened to when he speaks, and would be exceedingly astonished, if not actually offended, should any one be so presumptuous as to contradict him. In short, he spoke with a certain authority, to which, probably, the rest of the company were accustomed, but which repelled and offended Clare, as being slightly insolent, as well as arrogant and conceited.

Once, as she looked up, she encountered his gaze fixed boldly, and as she fancied critically, upon herself. He was evidently, as Mary Jane Stewart would have said, "taking stock of her." He met her eyes steadily and unabashed, and stared on till she became crimson with indignation and annoyance. From the sinister smile which curled his lips, it would not appear that his criticism was favourable ; and when, soon afterwards, she made some observation on the superiority of Paris over all other cities of Europe, he utterly confounded her by interposing brusquely, " You are altogether mistaken ; it is nothing of the sort."

She quite expected that her uncle would reprimand him ; but nothing was said, and no notice was taken, except that Tessie looked slightly discomposed. Clare regarded him haughtily for an instant, but made no rejoinder ; he went on coolly devouring strawberries, and seemed rather to enjoy her evident discomfiture. A more unpleasant, ill-mannered young man, she told herself, she had never before encountered. She was glad when the dessert was over, and she could retire with her aunt and cousins into the parlour.

It still rained heavily, and low mutterings of distant thunder warned them that the tempest had by no means

exhausted itself. Mr. Darlington remained in the dining-room, indulging in his customary "forty winks," Dick and Ralph, who had arranged for some trout fishing, went off to the mill, and Philip Warner walked up and down the verandah, sullenly smoking his solitary pipe. It was an hour or two later when Clare, tired to death of doing nothing, while all the rest appeared to have some settled occupation, went up to her own room, and for very weariness threw herself upon her bed, and tried to go to sleep. But she could not close her eyes; the melancholy drip of the rain, the murmur of the rising stream, and the continual reverberations of the far-off thunder, seemed to hinder her from obtaining the repose she sought. She was thankful when Edith looked in to see if she were timid of thunder; the storm being now much nearer, and the darkness deepening all around.

"No, I am not at all afraid," she returned, in answer to her cousin's question; "though I cannot say I like it; I think I always feel a little unnerved in a thunder-storm. I am glad you came to look after me."

"I should have come before, but I was afraid of disturbing you; we all hoped you were taking a little rest; but when the lightning became so vivid, and the peals so loud and frequent, I felt sure you must be awake. It is difficult to sleep through a great storm in the daytime, after one is past childhood. I am afraid this tempest will unsettle the weather."

"It is almost sure to do so, and in the country that must be quite a nuisance; half your pleasures here must be out of doors."

"Yes; and we had planned several delightful excursions as soon as you felt strong enough for them; but our great disappointment now is about the hay; there is a good deal of it down in the neighbourhood, though our own is nearly all safe. Philip was busy carrying the Abbot's Croft when the rain began—and that is the last lot; we have had unusually heavy crops this year."

"Cousin Robert is a farmer then, as well as a miller?"

"So far as the Home Farm goes, he is, of course; but he does not pretend to do much more, at the outside, than

supply his own household. Philip is the bailiff, and superintends the farm-work entirely."

"Edith, who *is* Philip Warner?"

"He is very distantly related to mother—his father was a sort of far-away cousin of hers."

"But how does he come to be here?"

"He was left an orphan when almost an infant, and mother, with father's full consent, made some kind of promise to Philip's father. There is a story, I believe, about his *mother*, but I never heard much of it. I am afraid it was something not very pleasant; she was an Italian, and a Roman Catholic. I really know very little about Philip's antecedents; he has always seemed to be one of us, I have looked upon him as a sort of elder brother ever since I can remember. I sometimes wonder that he is content to remain here, entirely devoted to agriculture, when he has plenty of money, and could travel if he pleased."

"He has travelled, though; he seems to know all about Paris."

"Oh, yes; he has passed two winters in Paris, and once he paid a long visit to his relations in Italy. He is much better educated than my brothers,—than any of us. He went to Rugby, but he did not make friends there; mother wanted him to keep terms at one of the universities, but he declined. He had made up his mind, he said, to apply himself to farming; and as both Dick and Ralph were wanted in the mill, it fitted in very well. Ralph is as fond of the machinery, we tell him, as if it were a living creature. And Dick, shy and reserved, as I dare say you thought him, knows all about the markets."

"I thought both Dick and Ralph very much nicer young men than this Mr. Warner; they are much pleasanter looking, and have better manners. Mr. Warner was quite at liberty to differ from me, of course; but he might have evinced a little more courtesy; flat contradiction is *not* agreeable."

"Ah, you are thinking of his unfortunate speech about Paris. Well, that was not very polite, I grant, but he did not mean any rudeness; it was only Philip's way. You will like him very much when you come to know him."

"I perceive that you are Philip's advocate, so I will say no more; if that is a specimen of his 'way' I cannot like it."

"He is really very kind-hearted and sincere, but to-day I fancy he was somewhat cross at being thwarted about the hay; he had built so much upon getting it all under cover while the fine weather lasted; he was up with the sun this morning, for the glass was falling last night, and he was a little afraid, but he did not at all expect the sudden down-pour."

"It was indeed very sudden; I was almost wet through in crossing the lawn. I heard them saying at dinner-time that such abrupt avalanches are not very uncommon in these parts."

"Rain comes very unexpectedly sometimes; it is owing to the hills, I suppose; all hill countries have their full complement of deluge—in England, at least. But we have been favoured lately; we have had three fine summers in succession, and we have not had a flood of any account—I don't recollect for how many years."

"Do you have floods then?"

"Indeed, we do. We have twice in my lifetime been in extreme danger; the Allan has risen and risen till we seemed to be in the middle of the sea. I was about ten years old when we were quite surrounded; we had had a wet spring and summer, and in the autumn, after a month or so of fair weather, there came a succession of heavy rains that filled the mountain streams, and turned all the brooks—or, *becks* as they are generally called in these parts—into torrents; and one morning, we got up to find ourselves on a little green island that became more and more circumscribed every minute. By twelve o'clock great waves were breaking against the front door, and all the lower rooms were under water."

"What did you do?"

"We could do nothing but retreat upstairs, and watch the waters rise with sinking hearts. But that was the least part of it; the great fear was that the timber of the mill—and perhaps of the house itself, should give way. My father and all his men were hard at work till it was too dark to see anything, and we sat up all night, to be ready for any

emergency, and the boats were moored under this very window."

"And how did it all end?"

"By God's mercy, the waters abated towards morning, and, when daylight came, we knew that we were saved ; gradually the river sank, but it was many weeks before we could make ourselves quite comfortable again. Every place was damp and mouldy, and the garden was not much better than a swamp ; it made me wonder how Egypt looked, generally, after the subsidence of the Nile. However well it may suit agriculture, it is not pleasant to find alluvial deposits in the parlour."

"I should think not, indeed, and it would not suit English farming, I should fancy."

"Well, you see, the harvest, such as it was, was well over ; and a good soaking did less harm to the land than it might have done at any other season. We got dry again, inside and out, before winter—before the frosts came, at least, and the deluge did not interfere with the spring-work, for it is then we generally sow our wheat. Oh ! what a flash ! and what a peal ! we must be very nearly in the focus of the storm. Sit here, dear, away from the window ; you look quite pale. You are not accustomed to our northern tempests."

"And yet I have known some terrible storms abroad, though never one quite so violent as this, I think. Yes, Edie, I *am* frightened ; I know enough of electrical phenomena to understand the danger of being within a certain radius of the source of disturbance ; it is always alarming when the lightning and the thunder come together, and I know what that terrible hissing sound means."

"Ah, yes, the *swish-h* of the lightning, so much like the rush of a rocket. I do not remember to have heard it more than once before in all my life ; it always means mischief, and the flash *scorches*, too !"

"It does, indeed, it is still quite hot upon my hands—and, oh, look ! it is playing along the roof of the boat-house. No ! I never saw lightning like *that*. Edie, if it comes any nearer we shall be killed. Ah ! you cover your eyes."

"I am praying to God, Clare. This is very terrible ! Oh ! what is that ?"

"The bolt has struck the house!" cried Clare, in extreme terror, "and it is falling! do you not hear the *crash?*?"

And a crash there was of stones falling and rolling; though one could scarcely hear it for the fury of the storm, the raging of the wind, which had risen suddenly, and the deafening roar of the thunder, which seemed as if it would never cease. The girls clung together, and stood appalled; was the house that sheltered them really falling to the ground? It was, without doubt, shaken to its foundations, and they dared not stir from the spot, though they longed to seek the solace of the companionship of the others. Edith would certainly have sought refuge—or comfort, rather—with her mother; but she could not leave Clare, who sank almost lifeless on the bed, her limbs refusing to support her. "Oh! pray, *pray!*!" she cried, wildly, "perhaps God will hear *you*."

And Edith prayed in silence—she was too much awed for utterance—and Clare prayed too, though not quite inaudibly; she was frightened nearly out of her senses, she was wildly begging for mercy, for preservation, for the abatement of the storm, for safety in the midst of this most awful visitation. And in the intervals of her incoherent petitions, she was begging her cousin not to leave her.

But in that tremendous thunder-clap, which was more like a violent explosion than aught else, the tempest seemed to have spent its force. There was, for several minutes, an absolute cessation of the war of the elements; the next flash was far feebler, and the peal that followed showed that the great peril was removed. The storm was passing away from their immediate neighbourhood, and both Clare and Edith took breath, and thanked God. In a few minutes Mrs. Darlington herself appeared; she was very pale, and her lips trembled, but otherwise she was calm and self-possessed.

"Girls!" she said, in a low clear voice, but in a tone that told Edith how strong was her emotion, "you are safe. Bless the Lord! I scarcely dared to hope I should find you unharmed. Come downstairs, it is safer away from that tall chimney-stack."

"Yes, mother," said Edith, as she assisted Clare to arise; "are they all safe?"

" All in the house are safe, thank God : the bolt fell upon the *ruins*, the old chapter-house is levelled to the ground. But come, children, father wants to see you all around him ; I should have come to you before, but Lina was fainting, and Tessie was too much scared for the moment to attend to her. Take courage, Clare, my dear, the terrible danger is passing away ; I could count seven or eight between the last flash and the thunder."

With trembling steps, almost supported between her cousin and her aunt, Clare ventured into the passage ; and she was reassured, as she beheld everything quiet and undisturbed as when she had ascended to her chamber, almost two hours before. Downstairs, all was in its usual order ; but the servants, as well as the children of the family, were assembled in the dining-room, where the head of the house sat with Lina clasped in his embrace. No one knew exactly the extent of the damage wrought, for the maids had rushed from the kitchen as soon as the storm began to be alarming, and the men and boys had followed when the great crash came. " Children," said the master, when all were quietly assembled, " I think now this awful storm has done its worst ; let us thank God, who has preserved our earthly lives, and saved us from the peril with which we have been encompassed. It is of *His* mercy that we are not consumed."

He knelt, and they all followed his example, while, in a few earnest words, he returned thanks for their providential escape, for the goodness which had shielded them, as a family, from all harm, and preserved each individual life, and spared them, one to another, without exception. " I bless Thee, O Lord," said the father, " that all my beloved children are about me safe and unscathed ; Thou hast kept our habitation, and been to us as a Shield and a Defence ; Thou hast kept us in the hollow of Thy hand while the tempest raged about us ; even the fierce fires of heaven could not hurt us, while Thou didst shelter and deliver us. Oh, therefore, should we praise Thee for Thy goodness, and for Thy wonderful works to the children of men. And grant, O Heavenly Father, that all these lives spared in Thy mercy, and by Thy wisdom, may be dedicated henceforth to Thee, to work Thy will upon

earth, and to show forth Thy glory and Thine everlasting love."

Clare had been so wrought upon by the terror of the storm, that she was not astonished at what she afterwards called this "impromptu prayer-meeting"; but an hour or two afterwards, when the great blackness had disappeared, and there was once more something like light upon the misty hill-tops, she began to think how very strange it was of her cousin to kneel down there and then, and speak to God in that calm and solemn manner, as if He were verily present, and in their midst. And yet she felt that never in her life had she been so near to death; never had her feet trodden for a little while so close upon the boundary that lies between this world and that other which is invisible, and yet so near; if one of those awful fires had but come a little closer, where, oh, where might she not have been?—would she have been with *Him*? safe and happy with Him, in His celestial kingdom, where there is fulness of joy, and are pleasures for evermore? or would she have been—must she not have been—with those who live without God, and have no portion in Him?

She felt solemnised, as she had never felt before, and when, an hour or two later, the storm being quite over, she went with the others to see for herself what really had happened, what that awful and never-to-be-forgotten crash had done, she realised how great had been the peril, how merciful had been the Providence, that had turned the course of that fierce electric bolt. It had fallen, as the servants had at first reported, on the *ruins*; but so near the house that the wonder was how possibly the inhabited building could have escaped. Two sides of the empty barn that went by the name of the "Old Chapter House" were utterly destroyed; scorched timbers and blackened stones lay in a heap upon the turf; and one end of the wing, a part of the actual house, in which lay the deserted chambers, had evidently been *struck*, the mossy tiles on the ancient roof being shattered and strewn all about, and the ivy torn from the venerable walls.

Later still it was discovered that mischief had been at work in those unused rooms; the electric fluid had come

down the broad open chimney, bringing with it masses of masonry and broken bricks ; then it had crossed the floor, charring the oaken planks as it advanced, and finally escaped by the casement, scorching the old stone mullions, and twisting the iron fastenings and the rusty stanchions into all sorts of weird and fantastic shapes ; nothing living could have met those awful fires and escaped ; had their path lain through the inhabited portion of the rambling mill-house, some lives must have been sacrificed, some terrible calamity must surely have ensued. All the family could not but experience the reality of that oft-quoted truism, " In the midst of life we are in death."

And as the evening advanced, a strange sense of unquiet pervaded Clare's mind, and she felt afraid to go up stairs by herself ; it seemed to her as if something ghostly had been in those upper chambers, and its influence still was felt. She was glad to think that the lonely blackened wing, where the smell of sulphur and of burnt mortar still lingered, was far removed from her own quarters ; that the fallen ruins lay quite on the other side of the house. It was the first time Clare had remained to join in the regular evening worship, which was evidently the custom of the house, since one of the servants, unsummoned, brought in the great Bible at a certain hour, while another carried in a pile of hymn-books, and distributed them.

It was a very short service ; the miller read, without comment, the 29th Psalm ; only he gave the final verse a second time, and with deeper emphasis : " The Lord will give strength unto His people, the Lord will bless His people with peace." Of course Clare knew that those words were in the Bible, and the Bible she acknowledged as a Sacred Book ; but the verse had never struck her before, and she had never wondered who really were the Lord's people, with whom should abide for ever the blessing of peace. She would have liked to ask the simple question, " Who are these people of the Lord whom He will bless with peace ? " but she could not make up her mind to speak ; it was partly shyness and partly pride that kept her silent. She had come into a new world, and the inhabitants thereof spoke an unfamiliar language ; in some sense she was as uncomfort-

able as she had ever been in North Tyburnia ; there was still no sympathy, no reciprocity of thought, no bond of sweet communion between herself and those with whom she sojourned ; and once more she felt herself alone—painfully, mournfully *alone*—and she longed for she knew not what.

The storm, as is so often the case, after a spell of unusually fine weather, broke up the fairness and the calm. Next morning, when Clare awoke, it was raining steadily, a vast unbroken canopy of clouds covered the valley of the Allan, and the river itself, turbid and swollen, had risen within its banks almost to overflowing. Would it be possible for any one to go to church ? The question was soon answered ; the rain became heavier, the outlook over the hills, in what was supposed to be “the weather quarter,” grew worse and worse ; a thick haze settled upon the higher ground, and quickly descended, and filled the vale below. When breakfast was over, Clare could not see the river or the woods, from her chamber window, the prospect was bounded by the evergreen-hedge below the lawn. No one, surely, would leave the house that morning. How should she while away the heavy hours ? She looked over her own books,—such, at least, as were unpacked—her favourites, from which she never allowed herself to be separated,—and not one of them seemed to be suited to her listless mood. She would willingly have slept the morning away, but that was not possible ; what could she do with herself till dinner-time ? What was the matter with her, that all her interest in Shelley and Byron, and even in Tennyson and Longfellow, was gone ; that her eyes wandered carelessly over page after page, which she opened almost at random ; that familiar lines that had always stirred her inmost heart, were mere “words, words, words !” and nothing more ? She went downstairs at last, in search of something as yet unread ; there were plenty of books unknown to her in the library ; surely she could find one wherewith to occupy herself ; she had chosen a volume that looked, she fancied, quite promising, and was about to return to her chamber with it, when Tessie came in, with Bible and hymn-book in hand.

“Surely you are not going to church in this soak ? ” cried Clare, really surprised.

"Oh no," replied Tessie ; "it is too late for church, and the covering we commonly put upon our wagonette turns out to be unfit for service, after the long drought ; we should be soon wet through in an open carriage. In the winter we very often cannot go, and we do as we are going to do this morning ; father is our priest, and Edie is our organist ; we make up a very good choir among us, including the servants. We are going to have service in the dining-room. Clare, will you come?"

"What a curious notion!" thought Clare, as she put her chosen volume back upon the shelf ; "really, my new relations are very curious people. Who ever heard of a religious service in the dining-room?"

The truth being that Clare had lived so entirely in a godless world that she could not conceive of a common daily life which had no orthodox religious parentheses, but was in its very essence religion itself. But to her cousin she only said, "Of course I will come ; I am quite ready."

She was too polite to demur ; every well-bred guest wishes to conform to the order of the house. It would be a *bore*, she thought, and she could only hope there would be no sermon. Then, without another word, she followed Tessie into the spacious room, where all the family was assembled.

CHAPTER VII.

A SERIES OF SURPRISES.

"How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world."

C LARE followed Tessie into the large dining-room, where she found all the family assembled, her cousin Robert seated at the top of the long table, Edith at the harmonium arranging her music, Lina and "the boys"

gathered on either side of her, with hymn-books in their hands. There were two vacant chairs, evidently reserved for Tessie and Clare, of which they immediately took possession, and then the bell was rung, and the servants—from old nurse down to the little farm-boy—trooped in, and seated themselves in orderly fashion along one side of the room as if there were nothing strange in the experience. They were evidently accustomed, all of them, to this domestic service, which seemed to Clare the most unprecedented proceeding in which she had ever taken part : it was almost as entertaining as going properly to church, she decided—nay, even more so on the present occasion, by reason of its utter novelty.

When all were settled, Mr. Darlington opened the service by giving out the well-known hymn, “Come, we who love the Lord.” It was very sweetly sung, to a familiar and cheerful tune, and everybody joined in, Edie leading skilfully at the harmonium. Clare accompanied the rest mechanically, but rather liking the service on the whole ; she took little notice of the words she sang—she had heard them before *somewhere*—the opening stanzas, at least ; two of the verses were omitted, the hymn being unusually lengthy. There were some lines, however, that struck her as rather peculiar, and she resolved to read them over to herself ; they sounded sweetly enough, but surely they were a little overstrained. The lines that attracted her attention were these—most of you who read this chapter will know them well enough :—

“ There shall we see His face,
And never, never sin ;
There from the rivers of His grace,
Drink endless pleasures in.”

And Tessie by her side, and Edie and her brothers, and parents, and some of the servants even, appeared to be singing out of their inmost hearts. What was it that these simple country-folk experienced in their very souls ? Were they Methodists—these rather peculiar relatives of hers, who seemed so dreadfully in earnest about their religion ?

Clare, I must tell you, nominally belonged to the Church of the State, and she always called herself a *Protestant* when

she was in a Roman Catholic country. Abroad, she chiefly attended the Romish services, only patronising the English Church on special occasions ; at home—that is, in her own country—she seldom went to church at all. She generally spent her Sundays in a listless, dreamy sort of way, rising later than usual, reading with her father, driving in the Park, or accompanying him in an airing to Richmond, or on the river ; she had never been taught that the day had any duties of its own.

At North Tyburnia she had generally gone with the family to St. Swithin's, till she made the unwelcome discovery of the curate's admiration, and began to suspect Mary Jane's jealous displeasure ; then she went "*nowhere*," as little Bella said, only now and then wandering to some distant church for the sake of whiling away the weary hours of the unsanctified Sabbath. That last Sunday evening had been her first and only experience of worship in a Noncon-forming church—in a "*conventicle*," as the Misses Stewart would have sneeringly called it. They were "*Church*," of course—"strict *Church of England*," whatever that may mean. They could not possibly be so vulgar as to go to "*chapel*." They also wished to be considered "*High Church*," for they had learned some of the ecclesiastical terminology of the day, and considered the *Evangelicals* to be no better—that is, no more genteel—than the Dissenters.

So that Clare's religious education, you perceive, was shallow in the extreme ; her father, himself a Positivist, had refrained from instilling into her youthful soul any principles of theology whatever ; he held that it was unfair to bias his child in favour of *any* creed. He called himself a Church-man, simply to silence opposing critics and well-meaning remonstrants ; and he allowed Clare to be confirmed when the Bishop happened to come their way—chiefly because a woman was exposed to annoyance, sometimes even to contempt, if she belonged to no denomination at all, and because it was outwardly respectable, and was, perhaps, to the feminine mind, something of a safeguard.

Of course she had a handsomely-bound Prayer-book, and a little gem of a Reference Bible to correspond, both of them her father's gifts. She also possessed a nice copy of

"Hymns, Ancient and Modern," which she had purchased herself soon after her arrival at Kilmarnock Gardens, as "indispensable," according to her cousins' showing, to a young lady of proper repute. And in the ownership of these volumes lay nearly all Clare's profession of religion as a "Churchwoman," and, alas! nearly all her Christianity. Personal religion she had certainly none; her principles were strictly negative, except in a moral point of view. She had never troubled herself about conviction or articles of faith; her father had involuntarily imbued her with a good deal of his own agnosticism, and she had come to the conclusion, several years before his death, that it was extreme folly to trouble oneself to any extent about doctrines and statements that it was impossible clearly to understand. And yet she had received the impression that religion of some sort was desirable *in a woman!* She ought to make profession of some kind of faith. A nominal creed was, so to speak, an ægis under the shelter of which she would escape a great deal of the contumely and suspicion which otherwise she might expect.

The pageantry and æstheticism of the Church of Rome had always had certain attractions for her, and she even sometimes experienced emotions that she supposed were reverential under the influence of sweet, thrilling music, and surrounded by a kneeling multitude. But such passing devotion was no more than transitory sentiment. Her common sense told her that a piece of bread could not be worthily and spiritually adored; and when she came to be brought face to face with Ritualism, as exemplified at the church the Stewarts attended, not only her common sense, but her good-feeling, revolted at the monstrous statement—

"Fresh from the atoning sacrifice
The world's *Creator* bleeding lies."

For Clare did believe in the God Almighty who made heaven and earth, and the words seemed to her an insult to Him, as well as to the creatures whom He had made. Further still, she had seen the worship of Rome in all its subtle power and glory—in all its intensity; and this puerile copy, this feeble imitation now presented, with a great deal

of vain show and feeble striving after effect, altogether repelled her. It was a sham, a pretence, a mere copy, and a very inadequate one, of the real thing.

Such had been the religious training of Clare Darlington, and such were her opinions—if, indeed, she had any—when having just completed her twenty-first year, she entered upon a completely new life at the Abbey Mill. I think I do her no injustice when I say that, up to this time, she held no true “*opinions*” of any kind. She had ideas, doubtless ; she had tastes, and she had proclivities, perhaps—but *not* opinions. The majority of people are opinionless, for an opinion implies the fact of a truth or untruth being accepted, not simply on hearsay, but on its own foundation, and it must have been calmly examined in all its bearings by the light of reason and by the testimony of revelation. Till this is done it is a mere sentiment, a floating idea, loosely taken up, and perhaps as loosely relinquished, which may or may not have truth at all for its basis. It is just a vague notion, which it is pleasant and perhaps seemingly expedient to entertain, but it is not an “*opinion*,” still less a settled conviction—a solid article of faith.

When the singing was over, Mr. Darlington read several Psalms and a chapter from the prophecy of Isaiah. Clare was thinking of something else—making up her mind that she would learn to play the harmonium—but one passage struck her ear, and for the moment riveted her attention: “He will swallow up death in victory, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces.” Could it ever be, that all tears would be wiped away? Did Cousin Robert read that in a poetic sense, or did he take it as a reality? Did he intend the statement to be accepted as sober fact? She rather thought he did. But now she was to be more completely and overwhelmingly astonished than she had yet been. The miller spoke to his eldest son, and then they all knelt down, and, after nearly a minute’s hush, it was Dick’s voice that broke the silence—Dick, the great shy rustic, the “*lout*,” as she had unceremoniously called him in her own mind; *Dick*, who had not—as it appeared to her—a word to say for himself, and who reddened and looked sheepish every time he was spoken to—at the

dinner-table, at least. Yet he could speak to God without the least confusion ; he could supplicate the heavenly Father without hesitancy ; the opening sentences, perhaps, were slightly tautological, but in a short time there was perfect freedom, and he evidently forgot that there were other hearers than He to whom he spoke. He supplicated for pardon, for *peace*—the very peace of which Tessie had spoken only yesterday ; he asked for wisdom, for light, for guidance, for strength, and for courage—for all blessings, spiritual and temporal—for *life eternal*. Solemnly, yet most earnestly, he put up these petitions, not for himself alone, but for all present. His closing prayer was that all then gathered around that domestic altar might be helped in joy and in sorrow, and, through all circumstances, to glorify God—living unto Him, and not for themselves only, for evermore. And the last words were those so commonly uttered, so well known—alas, so often thoughtlessly repeated—“Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.”

That Cousin Robert should be able to pray as well and fluently as a clergyman had seemed strange enough to Clare Darlington ; but that Cousin Dick, the raw lad, only several years older than herself, should be equally gifted, filled her with profound amazement. And it was all so simple, so earnest, so unlike anything she had ever pictured to herself ; there was a pathos, and beauty, too, in these prayers, such as she had never even imagined ; and again she came to the conclusion that it was like speaking to God, face to face, as if He were actually present, and listening with love and gracious pity, even as an earthly father might when his erring children besought him for pardon and strength, and for all blessings that he could possibly dispense.

“That minister I listened to last Sunday night had been educated at the University most likely,” she said to herself when the prayer was over ; “but I am quite sure neither Cousin Robert nor Dick was ever there. Who has been their teacher, I wonder ? I cannot fathom it.”

The next thing was the singing of the *Te Deum*, which seemed so familiar to them all that only the music and a stray book or two among the servants seemed necessary. Clare herself, perhaps, knew less about it than any one else ;

but she was as much struck now by the richness and power of Philip Warner's voice as she had been by the prayer that preceded it. It was a glorious voice, such as she had seldom heard—and she had listened to some of the finest singers in the world. What depth there was in it; what richness and sweetness; what *timbre*; what wonderful expression. And yet it blended well enough with all the other voices; that *Te Deum* must have been frequently rehearsed by them all, Clare privately decided.

Then followed another chapter—from the New Testament this time—and then another hymn, and then an address of about a quarter of an hour from Mr. Darlington; and lastly, the Thanksgiving Prayer, as rendered in the “Book of Common Prayer,” which was repeated aloud by all, and then a closing hymn, the very same that Clare had heard on the previous Sunday evening—

“ Father, whate'er of earthly bliss
Thy sovereign will denies,”

&c.; and then the Benediction, and the servants quietly dispersed to the kitchen, while the family remained alone in the dining-room. Clare went to her own room, ostensibly to dress for dinner, really to think over the morning's experiences. She did not come down again till the second bell had sounded, for she delayed her toilet so long that she had barely time hurriedly to arrange her hair and don her Sunday gown. But as she sat in solitude, lost in meditation, she heard her cousins singing in chorus below. Edith was at the harmonium, she felt sure, and she could distinguish Philip's rich, deep tones above all the others. It was “The Strain Upraise” they sang first; but Clare did not recognise it—she knew very little of sacred music; her father had never cared for it, though he liked some of the passages in the *Stabat Mater*, and would ask her to play some of Handel's overtures when he was in the mood for it. Generally speaking, his preference was for operatic airs and Beethoven's symphonies. As for her cousins at Kilmarnock Gardens, they practised chiefly *Gregorians* and *Masses* on the Sunday, till Mr. Constantine Delany's defection became manifest, and then they allowed the piano to remain closed

from Saturday night till Monday morning. Consequently, Clare was not familiar with the chants and tunes which seemed so well known to the country-cousins of the Abbey Mill.

But she thought "The Strain Uprise" was very beautiful, and quite out of the ordinary course; also another performance that followed, "It came upon the midnight clear," which she had never heard before. They were certainly very much given to playing and singing, this singular family; altogether, she thought how very different they were, in every respect, from that which she had expected to find them. I am obliged to confess, too, that she was not quite delighted at finding herself so much less superior than she had anticipated; but she had not shown them yet how well she could play, nor how perfectly her voice was trained.

After dinner there was more music, in which Clare took part, but she felt, when all was over, that she had not distinguished herself; her voice was thinner and weaker than it used to be; she missed the time more than once, and at last was fain to own that she was "out of practice."

It was now four o'clock in the afternoon, and the rain had quite ceased, though it was still extremely damp, and the heights were veiled in mist. There were, however, some faint rays of sunshine to be discerned ere long, and the young men proclaimed their intention of taking a stroll in the garden. Tessie retired to the schoolroom for an hour's reading with Lina, while Edith put on her bonnet and went to see an old pensioner, very feeble and infirm, who always looked for her young lady at least twice a week. Cousin Robert and Cousin Margery seemed inclined to doze over their reading, and Clare, feeling quite uninterested in the book she had chosen, adjourned to the library in quest of another.

Finding the room empty, as she had expected, she sat down to brood over the unkind fortune which had once more made her one of a family with whom she could not sympathise; she was dispirited—she scarcely knew why—more depressed even than she could have thought possible, kindly treated as she was, and out of sight and hearing of the objectionable Stewarts; she began to think that

happiness was not, and could never be for her ; all was “weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable.” And yet her young cousins were so bright and joyous, so entirely content with their lot in life ; while Cousin Margery, though the mistress of so large a household, and the mother of a family, looked so calm and cheerful that it seemed impossible to believe her brow could be really darkened by care or grief. The contrast made it all the worse for her, she thought ; she was the only one whose “psalm of life” was pitched in the minor key.

Clare was tired too, and was, perhaps, unconsciously a little nervously irritable ; certainly, she was far from well ; she had not really recovered from the prostration of the previous days ; the thunderstorm had not helped her to regain her equanimity, and the noise and bustle of a large family wearied her extremely. Whether or not it was the reaction from the long and severe mental strain from which she had undoubtedly suffered ; or whether there was an oppression in the atmosphere still charged with lingering electricity, it is difficult to say ; but certainly she felt unusually drowsy and languid, and alike indisposed to read or talk.

On one side of the room, near the large bay-window, was a recess sheltered by a curtain, and containing an old-fashioned, comfortable sofa, inviting to repose. Clare thought she would lie down there ; it was not very likely she would be disturbed before tea-time, and she had no sooner laid her head on the luxurious chintz-covered cushions than she fell asleep. The window was wide open on the side next the recess, but the ample curtain protected her from the draught, if there were any, and likewise from the observation of any one who might look in from the garden.

She had slept, she did not know how long, when she became suddenly wide awake, and heard voices close at hand ; also the scent of a cigar. She drew the curtain gently aside, just far enough to let her perceive that two of the young men were sitting on the window-ledge outside, their feet upon the gravel-walk.

“I dare say they will not talk any secrets,” she said to herself, after a moment’s thought, her first impulse being to rise and go away to her own room. But she was so very

comfortable in that snug corner—more comfortable than she had felt all day—she was quite too lazy to make the necessary effort, and “the boys” were not likely to say anything she ought not to hear; if she overheard what might be supposed to be at all *sub rosâ*, why, she could keep her own counsel.

For the first few minutes there was some casual talk about the river rising, allusions to the past disastrous floods, of which Edith had told her, and some passing reference to the storm of the previous evening; and then, quite suddenly, Philip Warner—for Clare knew his voice at once—said, “And what do you think of the new arrival?”

“I think she is charming,” replied his companion, whom the listener at once knew to be Ralph, and not Dick, though both brothers spoke wonderfully alike. “She is certainly very beautiful, and I should say very amiable.”

“Indeed! I should say the reverse; neither do I see much beauty in her face. Edie is far handsomer in my opinion, and Tessie is much sweeter-looking. Her features are regular enough—‘severely classic’ I daresay she thinks them, for I am quite sure she sets no small value on her own attractions; but she has not a taking expression. I don’t like the cut of her lips; they can curl very scornfully, I feel certain. On the whole, I am not prepossessed in favour of Miss Clare.”

“I think you are prejudiced.”

“Perhaps I am. But, prejudiced or unprejudiced, I don’t like her, and I can’t admire her. She is *not* beautiful in my eyes. I say, old boy, don’t you go and lose your heart to her.”

“Why not?”

“She will make mince-meat of it. She looks to me like a young person too much in love with herself to care about sweethearts, except as they flatter her vanity. Depend upon it, she keeps a *catalogue raisonné* of all her despised lovers, and prides herself upon her conquests.”

“Philip, I think you are shamefully uncharitable; you have no right to judge our cousin thus. But take care! she may make a conquest of *you*. Do not suppose you are altogether invulnerable.”

"A conquest of me!" and Philip laughed a loud jeering laugh, that made Clare bite her lips and clench her hands with something very much like rage. "I'll give her leave—full, free leave to make a conquest of *me—if she can.* I dare say she'll try; but I think I'm proof, Ralph."

"Do not be too sure. You cynics are always caught at last; you are most in danger when you least suspect it. Sheridan, or some one else, says, 'It is best to begin with a little aversion;' you will end by being fathoms deep in love with her."

"Not I, Ralph; you talk simple nonsense; you have evidently fallen under her spell yourself; don't take me for a fellow-fool. Pray let us speak of something more interesting than Miss Clare Darlington. I defy her to make me like her, much less *love* her. Once for all, she is not a girl to my taste. Let us walk on; we may go round by the willow-bridge before tea is ready. I did not think the afternoon would turn out to be so fine."

"Nor I."

And Clare lay still and listened to their retreating footsteps, and then she leaped up and ran, as if pursued, to her own room. Once there, she locked the door and sat down by the open window to cool herself. Her cheeks were crimson with anger, her eyes flashing, she felt herself equally insulted and humiliated. How dare he speak of her in that contemptuous tone! Clare was not naturally vain, as I observed before; she was too proud to be vain, but she had been accustomed to a good deal of admiration from the sterner sex: she had never sought it, but she had always received it as her undoubted right, and perhaps—*perhaps*—she was a little more of a coquette than she guessed herself to be.

She was listless and dispirited no longer; at that moment she absolutely hated Philip Warner, and she would willingly have punished him on the spot for his supercilious comments. She wished she did but know how to revenge herself, and the wish was certainly parent to the thought that almost immediately suggested itself. "Yes," she said, half aloud; "I can punish him, and *I will!* He shall suffer the penalty of his boasting, of his insolent depreciation."

tion. I have always despised girls who *flirted*; girls who brought men to their feet for the mere pleasure of rejecting them; girls who could fling off superfluous lovers as easily as they throw away old gloves. Heaven knows how guiltless I was, even in thought, of appropriating Mary Jane's milk-and water curate; but this is quite another affair. Besides, I have no idea that Mr. Warner is anybody's property; he is too much of a cynic, I am sure, to trouble himself about a woman, however good and beautiful. Yes, I will take my revenge; so have a care, Mr. Philip. We shall soon see whether you are as adamantine as you suppose. You will *never* love me, will you not? We shall see. I will *make* you love me, in spite of all your prudent resolves; I will never rest—never give up the game, till I see you an ardent suitor at my feet. And then—*then* I shall remember this afternoon, and recall its flattering declarations to your memory. I shall have something to amuse me in this dull place—quite a little drama of my own, played out for your especial benefit, Mr. Philip Warner. I have your kind leave to make a conquest of you, *if I can!* and I rather think I can, if I try my best."

When Clare went down to tea, she looked as calm as if nothing had occurred to ruffle her temper; when the young men came in she talked to Ralph, and listened with apparent interest to his account of the rising of the waters. She took no notice of Philip Warner; she did not even appear to be cognisant of his presence at the table.



CHAPTER VIII.

NOTHING TO DO.

"Dost thou love life? then do not squander time, for that is the stuff life is made of."

"WE are in for a spell of wet weather," said the miller next morning, at breakfast-time, as the rain steadily descended from a lowering canopy of dense, grey

cloud ; “ we shall not have to stand still for want of water, boys. I never saw the Allan lower than it was a week ago ; but it threatens to rise a trifle too high now.”

It was, indeed, a dismal morning : the hill-tops were veiled from view, the valley was filled with rolling mists, and the river, dark and turbid, rushed swiftly on its way to the far-off sea ; from the lower windows of the mill-house, they could perceive the rising of the waters as they bore down the reeds and rushes on the banks, and swept ruthlessly over the poor drowned lilies. Clearly there would be no excursionising for the present ; the great storm had quite “broken up the weather.”

How Clare got through that day she hardly knew ; she went on with her unpacking ; that, at least, was something in which she could take a passing interest ; but when, in the middle of the afternoon, all her wardrobe was neatly bestowed in the ample cupboards and drawers at her disposal, and her books ranged on the shelves given up to her use, she began to think life at the Abbey Mill would be but a very dull affair. It rained still ; it rained as if it never meant to leave off ; nay, it poured. Looking out, she could see the swollen hill-streams falling in sheets of foam from the dimly-seen uplands, and the roar and dash of the waters, pouring from the open flood-gates, almost frightened her.

“ I don’t like it at all,” she said mournfully, as she stood at the window of her room, and looked abroad at the aqueous world outside ; “ it looked sweet enough on Saturday morning, and I began to think I could make myself tolerably content here, for the summer months at least ; but I never bargained for this. Though I need not be surprised ; I always hated the idea of country life—it is only endurable in fine bright weather. Shall I ever forget that dreary week in Perthshire, and the day at the Trossachs, when we sallied forth in the rain out of sheer desperation ? I may be tempted to the same madness here, if this ceaseless rain goes on, for what *is* there to do indoors ? I am half inclined to go into the kitchen, and take lessons in pickling walnuts, or I might help Tessie—or *hinder* her, more likely—with her clear-starching. What *can* I do ? I hate sewing,

and I abominate fancy work ; nothing vexed dear papa so much as to see me put on a thimble and supply myself with needle and thread ; it was such a foolish waste of time, he used to say, when one might be reading, or writing, or drawing, or practising ; cultivating one's mind, and educating one's finer faculties. But one cannot be always reading, always at the piano ; I have got quite out of practising, I am afraid ; the keys feel strange to me, and I don't know what has come to my voice—it sounded so husky and tuneless yesterday, and I could not touch the higher notes as Edie and Tessie did. I feel as if I could not bring myself to practise steadily again ; I have felt so ever since my dear, dear father died. Why should I keep up my music when there is no one to appreciate my playing or singing ? ”

Then Clare inspected her books, and after much hesitation took down a volume of *Schlegel*, which contained, she told herself, some good tough philosophical reading ; and there was nothing like philosophy for bracing the mind, and attuning it to a right perception of the Good and the Beautiful. But *Schlegel* tired her ; he was a little too deep, just a little too abstract for her present mood, and she turned to one of her favourite poets, whose pages, however, after a few minutes' perusal, failed to rivet her attention.

“ What *is* the matter with me ? ” she cried, at length, throwing aside the dainty little volume in disgust. “ I seem to have lost all passion for literature. Has the lifeless, prosaic atmosphere of North Tyburnia taken away my appetite for reading ? If I cannot bury myself in my books here, if I cannot work at my music, or at my drawing, whatever will become of me ? There seems absolutely nothing to occupy one's mind here, unless one can go out of doors, and sketch or botanise, or ride ‘ over the hills and far away.’ Oh, dear, will it ever leave off raining, will it ever be fine and warm again ? I never saw anything more hopeless, more depressing, than this misty, watery world ! ”

And so it went on, day after day, mist and rain ! rain and mist ! and the waters rose and rose till the family at the Mill began to be apprehensive of a second deluge. The miller and his sons were beginning to look serious, and Philip Warner declared that another week of the soaking

weather would spoil the hay-harvest that had given promise of greater abundance than usual.

But one morning things looked a little better, and it was reported that the glass was steadily rising, to the great delight of everybody. It held up all that day, and at evening there was the finest sunset that had been seen since Clare's arrival at Duston. Her spirits began to rise at the prospect of outdoor exercise: she and Lina had been driven to playing battledore and shuttlecock in the hall, as an after-tea recreation. She had proposed whist or bezique, but no one seconded her; and it was at length discovered that there was not such a thing as a complete pack of cards in the house, only the reversion of what the children of past years had left, when they had quite outgrown the pastime of building card-castles. "And if we had them," said Edith, when she had succeeded in convincing Clare of the melancholy fact that it would be impossible to make up a game at whist, for lack of the necessary material, "there is not one of us who knows how to play at cards except Philip, and he agrees with father that it is a waste of time that might be far more profitably employed."

"Oh, then, Philip does know how to shuffle and cut, and make a deal; mysteries of which you are quite ignorant?"

"Mysteries of which we Darlings of the Mill are about as ignorant as we well can be. I don't know a 'knave' from a 'king,' and I never could remember which were clubs and which were spades. Besides, neither the father nor the mother approves of cards."

"I dare say they think it is simply *wicked* to touch a card."

"I am quite sure they do not. There can be no wickedness in merely handling bits of card-board—unless, of course, one bets and gambles; the sin seems to me to lie in the waste of time. I have heard of people playing at *bezique* night after night, just for amusement, to get rid of *time*."

"Well, and who can object to *that*? If time lies heavy on your hands, you cannot devise a more innocent way of getting rid of it, provided you do not play for large sums of money. Whist and *bezique*, and even old-fashioned *cribbage*, are better than scandal."

"But surely scandal is not an alternative?"

"It is a very common 'alternative' in society, I can assure you."

"Then, Clare, I pity 'society.' It is very bad to talk scandal, of course; but I do not see that it is very much better to kill the time that God has given for our use and for our enjoyment, and waste the precious hours that some day may be longed for in vain. I cannot see why we should do either."

"You cannot go to sleep always when you wish."

"I never wish to sleep, except at night—though I must plead guilty to a little nap on hot summer afternoons—*sometimes*. But that is very rarely; and mother thinks that when one is really and truly drowsy it is often from physical causes, and the wisest plan is to yield for a while to the weakness, and then go on again, all the brisker for the brief indulgence. One gains time, I am sure, from a little temporary repose—on occasion, that is. It would not do to make the relaxation a rule, of course; we young people do not require our 'forty winks,' though father and mother may—and very often do, I am positive."

"But, Edith, you talk as if it were a *duty* to be always doing something or other. One cannot always be at full stretch; even the servants need their seasons of enjoyment."

"To be sure they do, even more than ourselves, for they have not our mental resources; but, is not playing cards a childish amusement rather? Why, cards were invented to please a lunatic, were they not?"

"I suppose they were. And do not think I have a passion for gambling because I wanted a game at *bezique*. I really prefer whist, as being much more intellectual and decidedly more scientific than anything else of the kind. And it really does pass the time, of which we seem to have too much in these rural solitudes."

"I never have too much time, but rather the contrary. I often think the days are too short for all there is to do. Tessie and I, and the mother, sometimes deplore the too quick passing of the week; it is Saturday night before we have half-accomplished the tasks we set ourselves on Monday morning. And we very seldom have such

persistently wet weather—at this time of the year, at least."

"But there is the winter, when it is dark at four o'clock in the afternoon, and when one is sure to be shut up more or less in the house. What can you find to do with yourselves during the long winter evenings?"

"We find plenty to do, I assure you; we are never dull; bed-time comes only too soon."

"What *can* you find to do?"

"We read, and study, and sew, and knit. Tessie and I get through most of our fancy work in the winter evenings; in the summer, I must confess, we are neither of us too fond of the needle; there are such lovely walks and rides in our neighbourhood, we want to be in the open air whenever the sun shines. But we have our winter pleasures, too. There is skating, which we are all fond of; and moonlight rambles on clear frosty nights, and now and then there is a concert, or a lecture at Allan Bridge, and if weather permits some of us always attend them. Oh, a great deal goes on in the winter; for a country town Allan Bridge is very gay."

"Are there any balls?"

"Yes, there are several during the season, and I have been to three of them; but, on the whole, I do not care much for them, though I am very fond of dancing. Mother likes us to dance, sometimes, after tea, and we manage to get up a quadrille pretty often; we invite the Lewises, and the Elliotts from Duston End, and we take it in turn at the piano. Then we have plenty of music, and we practise our best part-songs and glees together, and play over our duets. Oh, we are very merry; neither mother nor father wish us to be always grave. I really believe you could not easily find a happier family than we are; you see, there are plenty of us, and there is so much to do."

"And I can find nothing to do; I feel disgusted with whatever I attempt."

"That is because you are not well, dear, and this incessant rain and mist is certainly rather depressing. It will be all right, now that the sunshine has come again; and the roads dry very quickly here. I wonder if we could venture on a ride this evening. You have your habit, of course?"

"Yes, I have brought my habit in case you might be able to accommodate me with a mount."

"There are several ponies we can have; you shall ride my grey, she is the gentlest creature, and carries a lady splendidly; I should not lend her to any one, for she has a very tender mouth, but I am sure she will just suit you."

"I should like a nice trot, I must say. I am so tired of staying in the house."

And as the evening became brilliantly fine, and the mud dried up apace, the girls were able to take their ride, and Clare, well-mounted and in excellent spirits, enjoyed herself as much as any one of the party, which consisted of Tessie, Edie, Madeline, and herself, escorted by Ralph and Philip. Dick stayed at home with his father, and helped him with the accounts; Mrs. Darlington pleased herself by repairing some of the mischief which the heavy rain had caused among her favourite flowers—she was very fond of gardening.

Philip Warner could not but admire Clare, who sat her spirited little steed with grace, and managed it skilfully; and when the ride was over he confessed to Ralph that the newcomer was really prettier than he had at first imagined, and was not nearly as proud and imperious as she looked.

"I think she is really beautiful," assented Ralph, pleased to find his taste applauded; "and how well she sits Florimel, and what a delicate hand she has, and yet how firm! I never saw a girl ride better."

A day or two afterwards, the fine weather still continuing, it was proposed at breakfast that the girls, and at least one of the young men, should drive in the wagonette to Allan Bridge. "And then," said Cousin Margery, "you will see our town, Clare my dear; and if you do not care for the shops, Philip or Dick can take you to the museum or the public library, or the Arboretum, while the others do their little business. Or you can go upon the quay; Allan Bridge is quite a seaport, although it is some miles from the sea; it is really a very interesting place."

"Thank you, cousin," said Clare, demurely, "but I will not trouble any one to attend upon me; I will do as the others do."

"Just as you like, my dear; but you really should see the

Arboretum, especially if the new carpet-beds are finished. And you will be tired of muslins and calicoes long before Edith and Tessie have got through their purchases. We always have a long order-list when we pay a visit to *Webster and Gray's!* You will scarcely be back before tea-time."

"Of course we shall lunch as usual at Tiffany's, and treat Clare to a Moorlandshire cake," said Tessie ; "we are noted, you know, for our confectionery at Allan Bridge. Clare will not regret Regent Street."

An hour afterwards the wagonette, drawn by a couple of handsome, though rather heavy horses, was brought to the door, and the four girls, with Dick and his father, were quickly on their way ; the miller having discovered that he had important business with a certain corn-factor at Allan Bridge, and might as well accompany his family. Philip would be busy all day at the home-farm ; Ralph would look after the mill, and take care of his mother as well.

Mrs. Darlington declared that she would not be sorry to have a solitary day without interruption, for the store-room needed thorough re-arrangement, and all the strawberry-jam pots had to be duly labelled and covered, and she had almost promised Lina a pound-cake of her own making, to be ready at tea-time.

It was a brilliant morning, sweet and cool in the shade, and only moderately warm in the sunshine ; their way lay through bowery lanes and across low hills, already purpling with heather, and odorous with fresh-springing wild thyme ; sometimes they drove by the river-banks, sometimes the road wound away from the shining Allan Water, and sometimes they passed through dark, leafy woods, where, under foot, the soft moss gleamed in the slanting sunbeams, and the fragrance of the pines filled all the balmy air. Clare sat with her Cousin Robert on the box-seat, as had been the case on her journey from Woodhampton to the Abbey Mill ; the place of honour was simultaneously voted to be hers. Rapidly borne along, the sweet breezes fanning her cheeks, and the pleasant murmur of the stream in her ears, Clare was in the best of spirits. "Ah !" she mused, "if it could be always summer-time, if the sun would always shine, and the flowers bloom perpetually, how delicious it

would be. One might be almost happy, even in the country."

The five miles, however, became seven, because Mr. Darlington chose to make a *détour* from the usual route, in order to show Clare a beautiful view of the winding and widening estuary flowing peacefully towards the open sea, and she was compelled to own that seldom had she beheld a lovelier prospect. Making a sudden descent from the eminence they had slowly attained, the quaint little town—partly grey and mouldering, like the Abbey ruins; partly modern and full of busy life—lay smiling at their feet. At the hotel they dismounted, and the carriage was put up; the miller and his son, after settling the hour of their departure, went off, intent on business; the four girls made their way, as speedily as possible, to *Webster and Gray's*, where, as Tessie and Lina said, they had their day's work cut out for them.

At first, Clare was amused at the shop and its contents; her cousins' idea of a *first-rate* linen-drapery establishment was certainly rather primitive. The fashions so triumphantly exhibited were certainly two years old; everything was, in her opinion, heavy and wanting in style, and there was scarcely any variety in the *lisso* frilling she asked for on her own account. The lighter purchases were made first, and they afforded some little entertainment, for where is the young woman who cannot feel at least a passing interest in lace and trimmings, and artificial flowers and bright-coloured silks and ribbons? Æsthetic hues and shades were only just beginning to be in vogue, and the taste for them had not as yet penetrated so far as this remote country-town, among the hills of Moorlandshire.

But the "frippery," as Madeline called it, being well disposed of, the young ladies began to consider the more sober items of Messrs. Webster and Gray's stock-in-trade. The counter was well cleared, the gauzes and fringes and gimps carefully returned to the shelves, and out came calicoes of the best make and of different qualities; fine Irish linens, mull muslins, and sundry modest ginghams. They had not nearly reached the bottom of the list when all four decided that they must enjoy the refreshment of a good luncheon

at Tiffany's before they proceeded with their purchases ; and Clare, who had with the utmost difficulty been repressing her yawns for the last half-hour, was only too thankful to accede.

"We will come back and finish presently," said Edith, who had been rather difficult to please in the matter of grey shirtings and huckaback, while Tessie had long hesitated as to the merits of rival makes of calico. "We shall do our work so much more satisfactorily if we take a rest now, and have what refreshment we require."

All were agreed, and they proceeded at once to the pastry-cook's, discussing as they went what they should commence with, for they were none of them by any means destitute of appetite, and even Clare wished for something substantial before she attacked the promised sweets for which Tiffany and Son were so very famous. Only Madeline was excessively surprised at discovering that the fame of Tiffany's delicious cakes and unsurpassed gingerbread had not reached London. She had evidently no conception of the vast resources of the great metropolis, which she supposed to be twice or thrice as large as Allan Bridge, at the utmost.

Luncheon over, Edith and Tessie were quite ready to return to the completion of their business ; but Clare only sighed over the prospect of at least another hour's contemplation of calico and towelling ; and Edie had bethought herself that it would be only wise to buy in at once some of the flannelling that would have to be got ready before the winter. Tessie caught sight of her cousin's weary face, and proposed that she should go with Madeline to the Arboretum, while she and her sister got through the rest of their shopping. "Or," she added, "she might prefer the Library, as she seems so tired, and the Arboretum is quite at the other end of the town."

"I should very much prefer the Library," replied Clare, eagerly catching at the suggestion ; "I am always pleased to see books, and I think I understood that there was a charming reading-room, where ladies could lounge away an hour."

"Oh, don't go there !" pouted Lina ; "no talking is

allowed in the reading-room, and one soon gets tired of the newspapers and serials ; it does not take long to look through *Punch*—and that is about all I care for."

"I can go very well by myself," replied Clare. "I really do not feel equal to taking much of a walk, and I should not enjoy the shrubs and flowers to-day. Suppose you all three go back to Webster's, and meet again—anywhere you please. Tell me where the Library is, and I can find my way there easily ; I have been used to strolling about London, and I do not mind it ; there really seems to be nobody in the streets, and I dare say the reading-room will not be crowded."

"No, indeed," returned Tessie ; "you will in all probability find no one but the librarian, and perhaps his assistant. I *have* seen half-a-dozen people there, certainly ; but then it was market-day."

After some little debate, it was arranged that one of them should conduct Clare to the Library, and introduce her to the reading-room, as one of their own family ; which latter proceeding was indeed necessary, Allan Bridge not having as yet attained to the distinction of a *Free Library*. Her name was to be duly entered in the *Subscribers' Book*, as Miss Clare Darlington, of the Abbey Mill, Mr. Darlington's subscription covering all privileges and requirements of his family. There she was to be left till four o'clock, when some one would arrive to conduct her to the hotel, the *rendezvous* agreed on previously.

A few steps brought Edith and Clare to the Library ; the requisite formalities were observed, and Clare presently found herself comfortably settled before a table covered with all last week's *Times*, all the leading periodicals, and yesterday's *Moorlandshire Chronicle*. The Allan Bridge reading-room, though not quite equal in size and grandeur to that of the British Museum, was large enough to accommodate many more people than would be likely to assemble in it ; and at the present time it contained only two ladies seated at a distant desk, apparently taking down notes, and making references to several volumes that were collected about them.

They did not seem to take any notice of the lonely lady

listlessly turning over periodicals: but she took notice of them, for it was quite a relief to see and hear persons whom she did not associate with all day and every day. The taller lady was elderly and grey-haired, she was handsome and of imposing presence; she was also very well dressed, and she wore gold-rimmed spectacles, while on her ungloved hand sparkled several valuable rings. She spoke in a calm, decided tone, as one accustomed to be obeyed; and she looked every inch a gentlewoman, Clare decided. The smaller and less dignified lady at her side was probably her companion, or, perhaps, her maid; *her* spectacles were framed, not in gold, but in steel; her thin and bony fingers displayed only a huge mourning ring; her dress was of frayed black silk, and antiquated make, while her bonnet had certainly seen its best days long ago. She was writing at the other lady's dictation, when Clare was somewhat startled by hearing her very peremptorily addressed:—"I really wish you would take care what you are about, Argles! Do you think I shall ever be able to make anything of that niggle? Why, you told me that you wrote a clear, legible hand, and were well accustomed to the duties of an amanuensis."

"This forefinger has been so weak ever since I had that dreadful whitlow, my lady," pleaded the other; "and for the last fortnight the rheumatism in my thumb-joint has returned."

"You ought to take better care, and not get whitlows and rheumatism; I did not bargain for an incapacitated secretary. The sooner you return to Worcestershire the better. I must look out for a more competent person."

On hearing which the unfortunate amanuensis threw down her pen and burst into an uncontrolled passion of tears.

CHAPTER IX.

A NEW RELATION.

“She was a most imperious dame,
And drove her hapless menials where she would.”

MISS ARGLES and her patroness had evidently quite forgotten the notice which stared them so conspicuously in the face : “*All conversation in this room strictly forbidden.*” Clare could only conclude that her presence had been overlooked, or that a mere girl would be held of no account in the estimation of so imperious a dame as the lady in question. She was, however, very sorry for the weeping secretary, though at the same time she felt no little contempt for a person who seemed to have so little control over herself. Why, Mrs. Stewart might have scolded like a fury, might have shaken and beaten her even, before she would have cried like a baby.

But her surprise rose to consternation when to a torrent of tears were added convulsive sobs that were almost hysterical ; and she was debating within herself whether she should adjourn to some other portion of the library—into one of the numerous book-galleries—when her purpose was frustrated by the elder lady exclaiming in a loud voice : “I am ashamed of you, Argles, crying like a naughty child because you are found fault with. This is the third time within about a week that you have given way in this ridiculous fashion ; last time you cried at the luncheon-table before my guests ; now you are performing in a public room to the great annoyance, I am sure, of that young lady, who must take you for an idiot—which you *are*. I shall go away, and inquire about that new work that was mentioned in the *Athenæum* ; perhaps if I leave you to have your snivelling out, you may consent to behave like a reasonable being when I come back again. If you are not composed —*quite* composed, mind—in a quarter of an hour, I shall at once send you off pack and package, without any notice. I

will not harbour such a blubbering baby in my establishment ; I want an amanuensis, not a grey-haired Niobe."

And away the irate lady posted, leaving the unlucky Argles to choke down her sorrow as best she could. Clare was very sorry for the poor old maid, down whose withered cheeks the tears coursed more and more freely as the moments passed away. She seemed unconscious of the presence of a beholder, and utterly careless of the criticism that her conduct might provoke. Clare looked awhile, half amazed, half saddened, and thought of some remark she had read not long ago, in which the tears of middle-age were compared to the rain of late autumn, which falls on the soddened turf, and on the draggled, faded roses that linger still, only to deface and ruin what little comeliness remains. At length she felt so sorry for the apparently inconsolable spinster that she found herself crossing the room to the table where lay the disregarded volumes, the offending MS., and a thin pocket-handkerchief completely soaked ; she ventured to say, "I am afraid you are in trouble ; can I be of any assistance ?"

The amanuensis shook her head so dolefully that her interrogator judged her to be beyond all earthly aid ; still she persisted—"What is it? Shall I bring you a glass of water?"

Not waiting for an answer, Miss Darlington hurried to pour out a tumbler full of the clear cold fluid that sparkled in a *carafe* near at hand, and brought it to the weeper. A little to her surprise, and very much to her relief, it was not refused ; Miss Argles drank and was refreshed, mopped her face with her wet handkerchief, and said, as clearly as snuffles would allow her, "I thank you very much, kind young lady."

"Pray compose yourself," continued Clare, wishing if possible to render assistance, but not knowing how. "I am afraid your friend will be—vexed—if she returns before you are quite calm."

"*Calm!*" exclaimed the mourner ; "how can I be calm? Oh, it is cruel—*cruel!*"

"What is cruel?" asked Clare, gently.

"You heard her—you must have heard her. She is

always scolding me and taunting me with my incapacity. She thinks poor dependents have no feelings ; she has no pity on the unfortunate. Oh, it is hard, *very* hard, to be chidden like a child when you are over sixty."

Clare thought it might be, and probably was ; still she could not help recalling the old proverb that "hard words break no bones," and she ventured to say confidentially, "I know it is extremely disagreeable to be scolded, and it hurts one when one is not used to it; but I would not cry any more if I were you—tears are of so little use, and they nearly always place one at a disadvantage."

"It is not only that I am scolded," replied the poor lady, once more essaying to make use of the drenched pocket-handkerchief ; "but—did you not hear her?—she means to send me away, I am sure she means it. And what *will* become of me?"

"Are you living with her, then—with that lady who left the room a few minutes ago?"

"Yes ; I am her private secretary. She is writing a book, you know—a book that is to revolutionise the minds of men, she says ; to make a wonderful sensation in the publishing world when it appears. And it really is a very wonderful composition ! I would write better if I could, but people always said I *scribbled*, or made marks like a spider crawling out of an inkstand over a sheet of paper ; and I dare say it's true, for very often I cannot make out my own notes."

And again the large tears gathered in her poor dim eyes, and she shook her head despairingly. "But," pursued Clare, "if you cannot write legibly—and there are people who *cannot*, I know—why did you offer yourself as secretary to a literary lady?"

"It seemed to be about the only thing I could do. I didn't want to go to the workhouse, and the situation offered. I would have been a governess if I could, but I couldn't. I should have felt like an impostor, if I had pretended I could teach anybody anything."

"Were you obliged to take a situation?"

"Yes ; I will tell you how it all happened. My name is Laura Argles, and I am sixty-two years old. My father,

Benjamin Argles—a grocer, he was, in Worcester—died nearly thirty years ago. He was not rich, but he had saved a little money, and I was his only child. I had enough to live upon comfortably, and I thought I should end my days in peace—for I never meant to be married ; when some one whom I thought very wise induced me to invest my little capital—and my *savings*, too, for I had never lived quite up to my income, thinking that perhaps I should want luxuries and comforts in my old age, that I could do without while I was comparatively young ; I assure you that I had saved upwards of two hundred pounds, though I had only a hundred and twenty a-year. Well, where was I ? I am always rambling away from my subject, they tell me, and I am afraid I am.”

“ You were telling me that some one wished you to invest your capital.”

“ That was it. If I had only been content to go on as my father left it, I should never have been at the beck and call of Lady Forest, nor of anybody else ; for I had plenty to live on in quiet comfort. But I was such a fool, I did as I was told. I put my money, all of it, in a *bank* ; I was what they call a shareholder, and the bank broke, and I don’t know what went with my property, but I had no more dividends, and no more principal, and folks said I might think myself very fortunate in escaping the ‘*calls*,’ whatever those may be. There was a dreadful mess, and my friends tried to explain it all to me ; but I never could understand business, and at the last some one said, ‘ It’s of no use troubling her, poor thing ; you can’t get blood out of a stone.’ I wish I was a stone, then I shouldn’t suffer as I do. But all my money went, and not a penny of it will ever come back again, they tell me. And I must live ; I can’t die out of the way, can I ? But it is very hard to have to earn your bread when you are turned *sixty*.”

“ I am sure it must be,” returned Clare, sympathetically ; “ it is bad enough at any age to be thrown on the world—for a woman, that is. But it must be dreadful, indeed, when you are no longer young. Could you not be a housekeeper, or something of that sort ? ”

“ I am afraid I couldn’t, for I never could keep accounts ;

besides, I have never been accustomed to anything menial. I have never soiled my hands, except with ink."

And as she spoke, she spread out two weak, nerveless-looking hands, that seemed incapable of any kind of service. No wonder her writing was illegible !

"But," resumed Miss Argles, "I don't know what I shall do now ; if Lady Forest sends me away without testimonials, whatever will become of me ? I shall wander about in the streets when I have spent the little money she owes me ; and when I sink down from sheer exhaustion—as I shall do before long—a policeman will pick me up, and perhaps he will drag me to the station, and declare he found me drunk and incapable on a doorstep ; and then I shall be sent to prison——"

"Stop, pray !" said Clare ; "you need not anticipate such horrors. I am sure so dreadful a fate will never overtake you."

"At the best, I shall have to go to the workhouse, I shall die a pauper, and be buried by the parish." And she seemed once more on the point of bursting into tears, but thought better of it, and solaced herself by crumpling her damp pocket-handkerchief into a ball. Clare could only wonder that so lachrymose and lugubrious a person had obtained a situation at all. And while she hesitated what next to say, Miss Argles's patroness returned, having evidently overheard the doleful forebodings of her dependent.

"You have been worrying this unhappy young lady," said Lady Forest, accusingly. "Argles, I do think you deserve to be whipped and shut up in a dark closet. There, now, don't begin afresh ; pack up your papers and come home. I am much obliged to you, madame"—and she turned politely to Clare ; "at the same time, I beg you will excuse my leaving you with such an idiot on your hands ; and you have somehow managed to compose her. Do you hear what I say, Argles ? we shall be too late for the train."

"Am I to go back to Silverbeach ?" asked Argles, almost inarticulately.

"To be sure ! Where else do you want to go, you silly old simpleton ?" Then turning again to Clare, "I really am much indebted to you, young lady ; you have administered

cold water, I see ; a remedy I might have applied myself—*externally*—if I had remained. A little more dampness could never hurt her, and might be salutary. I believe in homœopathy ; ‘the like cures the like.’”

At this moment the custodian of the room appeared, not to enforce silence, as might well have been expected, but to inquire if Miss Martha Brown-Johnson was present, as that personage was wanted downstairs immediately. Lady Forest instantly disclaimed the nomenclature on the part of herself and Argles, and as Clare did not speak, said, somewhat sharply, “I suppose you are not Miss Brown-Johnson ?”

“No,” answered Clare simply. “My name is Darlington—Clare Darlington.”

“Your name is *what* ?”

“Clare Darlington. Does that astonish you ?”

“Of course it does ! Why, that was *my* name before I married my deceased husband, Sir Raymond Forest. You must be one of ourselves ; I was Clare Darlington, till I became Clare Forest—almost five-and-twenty years ago. *Clare* is one of our regular family names, you know ; we are half of us Clares and Margarets. Who is your father ?”

“My dear father is dead ; but he was Richard Darlington, a man who would have made his mark in the literary world, had he lived a year or two longer.”

“When did he die ?”

“Rather more than a year ago, in Paris. This mourning I am wearing is for him.”

“And he was literary?—but, my dear, we are a literary family ; the Darlings are all people of culture, and of decided talent. Are you living at Allan Bridge ?”

“No, five miles away ; at the old Abbey Mill on the Allan Water, near the village of Duston—if you ever heard of it ?”

“I never did. What are you doing there ?”

“I am staying with some cousins—distant cousins. The miller and my father were related.”

“Then the miller and I must be related also, for I am a Darlington born. I always knew I had a lot of relations somewhere. Let me think ; I remember *Richard*

Darlington, when I was a child. He married to displease his family, I believe?"

"I believe he did; his marriage was regarded as a *més-alliance*."

"An error of judgment always severely reprehended by the Darlingtons. What made him do it?"

"I suppose he married to please himself. He was very fond of my mother, and the displeasure of his own family never troubled him."

"And who is the miller? is he a Darlington?"

"He is Robert Darlington, my father's second cousin."

"Whoever he may be, we have lost sight of *him*; I did not know there was such a person as Robert Darlington in the world; and he is a *miller*, you say?"

"Yes, people call him the miller of Duston. He has always lived at the Abbey Mill, and his father before him."

"Whom did he marry?"

"I do not know who Cousin Margery was. I can only say she has been, and is, very kind to me."

"Well, I must not stop any longer, for Argles and I *must* catch the next train to Weatherfield—the nearest station to Silverbeach, where I am staying just now, to be quiet and secure from interruption till my book is finished. You know Silverbeach, of course?"

"No, I do not; I never was at Allan Bridge before to-day; and it is less than a fortnight since I first set foot in Moorlandshire. I have lived nearly all my life in London, or in Paris; country life is quite new to me."

"Come and see me at Silverbeach; it is the prettiest little seaside place I ever met with; I came upon it quite accidentally, just a month ago, and found furnished apartments which suited me exactly. I shall stop where I am till my book is finished. It is a philosophical and historical novel, and will surpass all that has ever been offered to the reading-world; I'll read you the opening chapters, when you come—which day shall we fix upon?"

"I think I must speak to my cousins; I should not quite like to make any engagement while I am their guest without their sanction."

"Never mind 'sanction.' Take my advice, Miss Clare

Darlington, and dispense with needless ceremony whenever you can. Why, am I not your cousin? I am sure I don't know how far removed; but we can settle that point when we meet at Silverbeach—I have all my private papers with me; I never travel without my *pedigrees*. Say which day I shall expect you."

"I will write and let you know, if you will give me your address. I will speak to Cousin Margery to-night, and write to-morrow."

"Very well; here it is—'Silverbell Cottage, Silverbeach, near Weathersfield, Moorlandshire.' And mind you do write—at once. I want to talk to you about a thousand things. I don't find a kinswoman every day—young and handsome, too, and evidently gifted with plenty of common sense, of which that silly old Argles is entirely devoid. Argles! it is close upon train-time; don't stand staring like a thunder-stricken donkey; run off as fast as your legs will carry you to the cab-stand round the corner, and bring up a two-wheel in ten minutes less than no time! Off with you! and don't hire an omnibus or a water-cart in mistake."

"Let me go!" cried Clare; "I can go so much faster, I am sure."

"No; I want to say something else to you, and Argles can run as swiftly as Atalanta, if she chooses. She has no superfluous fat on her bones; she carries no weight."

Exit Argles, scuttering out of the room and down the broad stairs with a speed that would have been perfectly ridiculous had it not been such a sorry spectacie—that of the poor old maid running herself out of breath at the command of her imperious mistress.

As she disappeared, Lady Forest resumed: "Come as speedily as you can, for if you can pay a visit to one cousin, you may to another; and who knows whether we can't agree to come to terms? I must have another amanuensis. That silly old Argles will drive me crazy; she is always doing something glaringly stupid, and she *cannot* write legibly or quickly, and she's half blind, and getting very deaf. Some day I shall lose my self-command, and shake *her* out of the little sense she has; and I don't want to lay

hands on her, if I can help it—it is so undignified. Well, what do you say?"

"I can say nothing on the spur of the moment. We may be *kinswomen*—I have no doubt we are, for you remind me of my father—but we know naturally nothing of each other, and I should not display much of the common sense with which you accredit me if I entered, now, into even a temporary engagement. But I think I may pledge myself to see you again; I am my own mistress, though I owe something to my cousins of the mill."

"Very well; you are rather an unpersuadable young person, I find, but all the better for yourself. I suppose we Darlingtons are all persistent and self-willed, and I cannot bear women with no bones in their characters. Argles has neither muscle nor bone in her mental composition; she is as limp as a rag-doll when the nursery has discarded it. Ah, here she comes—out of breath, of course, and blowing like a broken-winded horse. Good-bye, Cousin Clare; we shall just, but only just, catch our train."

And the next minute she was flying down the stairs, followed by the panting Argles, who tried in vain to keep up with her agile patroness. Clare went to a window that commanded the street, saw the two enter a hansom cab—Argles tumbling in head-foremost, as the vehicle started off at express speed—the driver having evidently received his orders from my Lady Forest.

When the cab was quite out of sight, Clare sat down to collect her scattered senses; it had all happened so quickly and so unexpectedly; nothing could have been more entirely unforeseen than her meeting with this strange lady, who claimed to be her relative, and who would fain have her throw in her lot with hers. Lady Forest and the unfortunate Argles seemed like the phantasms of a dream now that they had disappeared from view. Yet it was no dream, Clare assured herself, for there was the pile of volumes which the pair were consulting when first she saw them, and there was Argles's poor little soaked rag of a handkerchief, dropped at the last moment in her breathless hurry.

"I never heard of 'Lady Forest,' but I am quite con-

vinced she is whom she claims to be," Clare was saying to herself, when she heard footsteps ascending ; and the next moment her cousins were in the room, apologising profusely for her long detention. They had only just finished their shopping, and had, even then, omitted some articles set down in their list—for their father had arrived to say that the horses were harnessed, and all ready and waiting for their departure. Cousin Robert was quite concerned when, in answer to various inquiries, he found out that Clare had literally seen none of the lions of Allan Bridge, save the outside of the Market Place and the inside of the public Reading Room.

She did not refer at all to her adventure as they drove home, for Madeline was chattering "nineteen to the dozen," as her brother Dick assured her, and the others had a good deal to say about the various items of business transacted in the draper's shop. The miller, too, seemed thoughtful, and rather perplexed, and Clare learnt afterwards that he had made but a very indifferent bargain with the corn-dealer. It was not till tea was quite over, and all were sitting together in the parlour—that is to say, all the ladies of the family—that Clare found opportunity to tell her story, which was quite as surprising to her cousins as to herself. She, however, refrained from mentioning the proposition which Lady Forest had made, of her assuming the duties of the unsatisfactory Argles, and spoke only of the invitation she had received, and of her own wish to respond to it, "if Cousin Margery saw no objection."

"Well, my dear," said Cousin Margery, when she had fully mastered the position, "I cannot object, of course, if it is all fair and above-board, as it really seems to be ; and you are your own mistress. But I think we ought to make ourselves perfectly sure that this strange lady is actually the person she claims to be. I never heard of a Lady Forest in my life ; did you, Edie ? "

"No, mother," returned Edie ; "but then we have heard of so very few persons—of scarcely any who live in the great world, as this lady doubtless does ; she is only a summer visitor at Silverbeach. But if she is indeed one of the Chalkshire Darlings, our very, *very* far-away arist-

cratic relations, I wonder that Clare does not know something about her."

"The Chalkshire Darlings and my father quarrelled over his marriage, as you know, Cousin Margery, a quarter of a century ago. He was much incensed at the course they pursued, and when they took no notice of the tidings of my brother's birth—formally conveyed to them, I believe—he was highly indignant; and vowed that he would never trouble himself to seek intercourse with them again, not even distantly. And as time passed away, and they never met, save as strangers, the family became as dead to us. My father never spoke of any of our wealthy and prosperous kindred for the last few years of his life. I think he forgot all about them. I only knew that such people did exist, or had existed; but, as far as I can recollect, their names were never mentioned. I had heard, however, before to-day that *Clare* is a family name; that the Darlings for many past generations had christened their daughters *Clare* and *Margaret*, and, if I am not mistaken, *Katharine*. Lady Forest must have married soon after the family feud commenced."

"There is an old book of the *Landed Gentry* in the library," interposed Tessie, "and there is all about the Chalkshire Darlings in it, I am sure. I remember reading it one day, and asking father if they were in any way connected with us, and he said, 'very distantly, if at all,' and I had better not trouble myself about the Chalkshire Darlings, who were an old county family, and would never acknowledge *plebeian* millers and farmers, even though we might, perhaps, trace collateral descent. I have not thought of it from that day to this, but I know where the book is at this precise moment—on the top shelf, all over dust, I dare say, and quite out of reach without the steps; but I will soon get it, Clare."

The book, when reached down and dusted, was found to be of such ancient date that the present generation of the Darlings did not appear in its pages. Clare's father, aged four years, figured only as the seventh son of a second son; but there were Clares and Margarets and Katharines of divers ages, and one of them might very probably have

married Sir Raymond Knight, whose name, however, did not occur in the *Baronetage*. It was finally decided that inquiries should be made ; Clare must postpone her promised letter for a day or two, and in the meantime the miller would write to the clergyman whom he knew to be now "doing duty" at Silverbeach.

CHAPTER X.

FORGETTING AND FORGIVING.

"Life ! I know not what thou art,
But know that thou and I must part ;
And when, or how, or where we met,
I own to me's a secret yet."

"IT is all right, Clare," said the miller, when he came in to tea an evening or two afterwards : "I had to drive over to Allan Bridge this afternoon, and there I met my old friend who is taking the Sunday services at Silverbeach this summer ; and he knows Lady Forest quite well, and guarantees her trustworthiness and respectability, and that sort of thing, you know. At the same time, he says, he can only testify to her being precisely the person she claims to be ; she *was* a Miss Clare Darlington, of Chilling Towers, in Chalkshire, and she married a wealthy city knight, much older than herself—a Sir Raymond Forest, who died, and left his widow in very comfortable circumstances. Indeed, people do say that she is *rich*, extremely so ; but not of a too generous disposition. She is peculiar, and takes whims and fancies into her head, from which nothing can turn her so long as they last ; her latest crotchet is *literature*. She imagines herself to be gifted with unwonted powers of authorship, and she is now engaged on a three-volume novel that is to astonish the world. She keeps a companion, who acts as secretary or amanuensis—the Miss Argles whom you met yesterday, no doubt, my dear."

"Then, there is no reason why I should not spend a day with her, as she requested?"

"None at all, but every reason why you should. You will soon find out whether it is desirable to cultivate a closer intimacy ; she is, I should say, a nearer relation to you than we are, and it is well, in most cases, to be on friendly terms with one's own kith and kin ; write to her, and choose your own day for the journey."

"You do not object, Cousin Margery ?"

"Certainly not, my dear. I think, with my husband, that you ought to know something of these relations from whom you have been so long estranged. A day at Silverbeach will be a nice change for you. It is a very pretty place ; we were there for a week, two years ago, after Lina and Tessie recovered from the measles, and we enjoyed ourselves immensely. But I am not quite sure that you can get to Silverbeach and back again in a single day, without making your visit so short as to be most unsatisfactory."

"Is it then so long a journey to Silverbeach ?"

"It is not so far, as the crow flies ; twenty or twenty-five miles at the farthest ; but it is five miles' drive, as you know, to Allan Bridge, where you take the rail ; and Weathersfield, the nearest station, I believe, to Silverbeach, is at least four miles from your destination."

"There is a branch-line in progress," said the miller ; "and when it is opened, you will get to Silverbeach from Allan Bridge in five-and-thirty minutes, they say. At present it takes an hour-and-a-half, and the trains are not too conveniently timed."

"Yet I can scarcely invite myself to stay all night," remarked Clare uneasily ; "and Lady Forest only asked me to spend a *day* with her ; and yet——"

And here Clare paused, for she suddenly remembered that something more than a passing visit had been intended when the suggestion had been made of her taking Miss Argles's place ; but for some reason, which she could scarcely herself fathom, she had resolved to say nothing, at present, of the probability of her finding a home with her newly-found kinswoman. She determined at last, however, to write to Lady Forest as she had promised, and say that

she would accept her invitation for any day in the following week most convenient to herself, provided the weather should not be too unfavourable for travelling; but as the distance was greater than she had imagined she would be obliged on her return to take an early afternoon train from Weathersfield.

This letter naturally brought back an immediate reply from Lady Forest. Any day would suit her, but she would name Wednesday, as she would have quite finished the first volume of her book; she would herself meet Miss Darlington at Weathersfield Station, and she could not think of permitting her to return the same day to Duston, which she had discovered was some miles distant from Allan Bridge. She must remain her guest, at least, till the end of the week.

This was satisfactory; for, as the girls and their mother confessed, it was scarcely worth while taking so troublesome a journey for such very inadequate results. She and Lady Forest could not find out much about each other in two or three hours' time; and then, it would be tantalising to have just one look at the sea, and turn away again directly. It was a beautiful shore, too, and the sea-breezes would do Clare so much good, and bring back the colour to her cheeks; she had never been quite the thing since she arrived at the mill—she had not quite thrown off the languor induced by over-fatigue.

Clare's cousins would certainly not stand in the way of her enjoyment, and, though they all declared they envied her the rambles on the shore, under the beautiful cliffs they remembered so well, they evinced such unmistakable pleasure in her "little outing," as Cousin Margery persisted in calling the excursion, that she could not but secretly wonder at their amiability, and contrast them with the cousins she had left behind her at North Tyburnia.

Of course, she had written no line to any of them; she could not suppose that any Stewart of them all cared in the least what became of her; she had been civilly turned out of doors, and, if she had failed to find her way to Moorlandshire, and been compelled to wander about homeless and unprotected, and with nearly empty pockets, a waif and stray upon the wide, wide world, what business was it of theirs?

They had got rid of her, and that was all they cared about, so long as blame and reproach were not imputed unto them. She was, therefore, quite startled when, on the evening before her projected trip to Silverbeach, her cousin Robert called to her from the garden, where he was taking a leisurely stroll in the twilight, "Come out, Clare ; I have had a letter from one of your London cousins."

She went out immediately, and she saw at once that the open letter which the miller held in his hand was not from any of her unfriendly cousins, nor from her aunt Mary Jane, but from her uncle himself.

"I say, Clare my dear," he began, "but this is not very good manners ! Your uncle complains that you have been nearly three weeks away from Kilmarnock Gardens, without sending a single word to assure them of your safe arrival at the mill."

"I never dreamed of writing to them," she said coldly, and rather haughtily ; "so long as they were free of me, they cared nothing at all as to what became of me."

"Did you not part friends, then ?"

"No, we did not. They told me that I must come here, and they intimated that when my visit to you had come to an end, I was not to think of returning to *them* ; they would not even allow me to leave any of my goods and chattels under their roof. They left me to make all my own arrangements ; they gave no assistance in my packing, which was arduous enough, for it was the first time in my life I had ever been left to my own resources—they did advise me to *warehouse* such of my *impedimenta* as would be too cumbrous to carry about with me,—that was the extent of their consideration. I had to leave very early in the morning, so that I might reach the end of my journey the same day, and no one rose to bid me farewell, or to say a kindly word to me before I left the house, as I suppose, for ever. The poor little drudge of a kitchen-maid—the person of lowest consideration in the whole establishment—got me some breakfast, and helped me to carry down some of my light luggage. I saw no one else, and she had clearly no orders to make any provision for my probable needs during the journey. You exclaimed, yourself, at

my aunt's want of consideration in sending me forth on my travels without a well-packed luncheon-basket, such as Cousin Margery would certainly have provided for the meanest of her underlings ; but it was not *inconsideration*, it was deliberate heartlessness and malignity."

Cousin Robert was amazed, not only at the revelation to which he gave ear, but at the positive bitterness with which Clare spoke. There was colour enough in her face now, and her eyes sparkled with fierce anger ; she wound up by saying, in a tone of intensest hate, " I loathe them all—except, perhaps, my uncle, and him I despise, for he knows and feels that I deserved better treatment at their hands. But he is a coward, a sneak, and for the sake of a base, low-minded, unreal *peace*, he permits his vulgar, spiteful wife and daughters to work their will. Yes ! I detest them all ! "

" My dear child, you must try to overcome this hate—you must pray against it."

" *I never pray !*—what is the use of praying ? "

" Poor child, do you really know so little of God that you never care to speak to Him ? Do you not pray sometimes, Clare ? "

" I ask God to do something for me, now and then, when I am at my wits' ends, but I scarcely think that can be called *prayer*. I cried to Him in the great storm, for I was frightened out of my senses nearly, and I did not want to die ; I was desperate, I suppose."

" That proves that deep down in your heart you believe in the existence of a God, who is powerful to save and to succour man in the hour of his extremity. But prayer means something more than just asking for what one *wants* ; for safety in danger, for preservation, and for all the blessings of this life. What should we think of a beggar who entreated us for the alms he craved, and took our supplies with a thankless heart, never thinking of the gratitude he owed ? "

" I suppose we should think very ill of him, as I daresay God thinks of me. But I cannot help it."

" My dear, you must not speak so. You must not speak of God, our heavenly Father, otherwise than reverentially in this house. But you *can* help it. God has given you affec-

tions, and faculties, and reasoning powers, and He calls you to Himself; He calls you daily and hourly, child, saying, Daughter, give Me thy heart. And till you do yield to Him all you are and have, you will be a miserable woman. For I have seen enough of you, Clare, to be sure that you will never be *satisfied* till you have found Christ, and own Him for your Saviour and your King. You may go on drawing water from the cisterns of this world all your days, but you will still be thirsty, and you will yearn, willingly or unwillingly, for the springs of heavenly life. It is of little use to talk to you about the sinfulness of hate, so long as you are not convinced that the sin of all sins, the source and origin of all evil, is an obstinate rejection of God's love as shown to us through Jesus Christ. But I cannot stay longer, Clare, and if I could I should only waste words; the blessed Spirit of God must soften and illumine your heart before you can receive the truth. And, Clare, He is waiting at this moment to fill your whole soul to overflowing, to bestow on you a full pardon for all the past, and to give you all the grace you need for days to come. Accept Him, and that perfect peace which nothing earthly can give, the peace which passeth all understanding."

And gravely and sorrowfully Robert Darlington walked away, and Clare sat down in one of the arbours of the garden and wept bitterly. No one had ever before spoken to her in such a strain, and she wondered—half in anger—why they could not leave her alone, to live her own life, and to go her own self-chosen way. Then a voice, which she could not silence, to which she could not however willing, turn a deaf ear, said in her soul, "*the end of these things is death.*" And she knew, even without introspection, that it was her *pride*—her indomitable, cherished pride—that stood in the way of her embracing the way of life.

In the morning the miller said to her, "Clare, my dear, I have written to your uncle, and told him that you are quite safe and well under our roof, and that so long as you need a home you will find one with us. I have said nothing more, nor have I made any mention of the members of his family. I thought it better not."

"Far better not," she replied, emphatically. "Cousin,

I shall always hate the Stewarts—it's the badness of my nature, I suppose. But I will try to think as little of them as I can ; I will forget as far as possible my experience at Kilmarnock Gardens."

" You will forget, but not forgive ! Now, I think it is impossible really to forget ; I always thought the old proverb about forgiving and *forgetting*, if taken at all literally, was simple nonsense. You *can't* forget anything while you retain sense and memory, however hard you try. There are some things we *cannot* do, though God may do them for us. We cannot love at will, nor can we believe at will, neither can we forget when we elect to do so."

" And if forgetfulness is impossible, then forgiveness ? "

" Ah, my child, you do not think what you are saying. God never forgets our past of sin and ingratitude, of rejection of His proffered grace, yet He freely, fully forgives. The moment you ask His pardon—sincerely, earnestly ask it—it is granted, though I suppose the sins of past time will always have their results in this life. The law of gravitation is not more immutable than the law of consequences ; sin and sorrow are inseparably connected. What a man soweth, that shall he reap. If a child will touch fire, he must suffer the pain of fire ; and yet God, in His infinite love and mercy, often interposes and delivers us from the *very worst* that we may, by our folly and our wilfulness, bring upon ourselves ; in judgment He remembers mercy. But, Clare, I fancy you must have promptings to pray in your heart sometimes ? "

" Yes, I felt that there was a dread Power about me that day of the thunderstorm—a Power that might strike me, either dead where I stood, or turn the fierce electric fire another way. And almost instinctively I was impelled to supplicate the clemency of that awful Power, in whose hands were at that moment the issues of life and death."

" The issues of life and death are *always* in His hands, Clare. We are encompassed by peril continually ; every breath we draw is by His permission ; we cannot move hand or foot without some threatened danger, unless He avert it ; no one may dare recklessly to count upon *to-morrow*."

" That is a terrible idea ! Of course, life is uncertain ;

but are we not inclined to think all men mortal but ourselves? Would it be good to be always preparing for *death?*"

"In one sense, certainly not. Nor do I believe in the common jargon about *preparing for death*. People talk as if the saying of certain words, or the performance of certain tasks, would work miracles, and make them ready for a life for which they have never sought to fit themselves—which they have never tried to realise. Different people have different notions of heaven, you know, from the poor old German woman, who thought every day would be a Sunday, and she would be able to have a clean apron always, and sit still and sing hymns without ceasing—to the faithful soldier of Christ, whose great joy it is that, in that unknown world beyond the grave, 'His servants shall serve Him; and they shall see His face.' No; we need not prepare for *death*, for there is really no such thing; let us prepare daily and hourly for further life—for 'the life of the world to come.'"

"You talk as if you had not a single doubt of that life, Cousin Robert."

"Nor have I, Clare—have you?"

"I find it difficult to believe what I cannot explain."

"Well, then, you must find it difficult to believe in your own existence, and almost in your common physical life. And you know you are not mere flesh and blood. You do not doubt that you have a *soul*—a *something* that dreads, and hopes, and rejoices, and loves, and hates—a something that can soar away to unseen realms, that can rush in one moment to the other ends of the earth, while your body is here; and yet you cannot account for it; you cannot solve the inexplicable mystery, which yet is a patent fact."

"Well, I must give that up, then. I certainly cannot explain how I began to exist as a sentient creature, and yet I know, beyond all doubt, that I do exist; and I shall probably exist for ever."

"My dear, the soul itself testifies to its own immortality. If there were no hereafter our earthly life would be but a dreary, unanswerable conundrum at the best. We want the future, if it is only to finish what we have well begun in the

present—to carry to perfection the imperfect beginnings which seem only failures here. And here we see but darkly—we grope, and gaze through mists and tears, with only now and then a glimpse of the fulness of joy that is awaiting us; *there* we shall know, even as we are known. And *I want to know*, don't you?"

"Indeed I do. It is humbling to find how very, *very* little we really do know; to find how, at every turn, we are met by some insuperable difficulty—some problem that we cannot solve—we are always being *baffled*. Yes; it will indeed be good to *know*, for knowledge is power."

"And knowledge gives content. Knowing the truth we are satisfied. In this finite state we can only partially and poorly understand; in the infinite we shall feel and learn and comprehend the Infinite. Oh, child, if this life were all, one might well question the goodness and wisdom that gave it to us—that forced it upon us, indeed, for we had no choice but to put on these earthly coils. Blessed be *His* name who bestows upon us life eternal. Thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!"

And then and there the conversation ended for that time, but it never could be forgotten; Clare could never quite put away from her memory much that had been spoken to her that summer morning, while the beauty of the natural world, with its flowers, and buds, and waters, surrounded her, instinct with life and loveliness.

"Ah yes," she said, as she turned away, after watching her cousin along the gravel walk till he entered the mill; "it must be very sweet to be able to say, deep down in one's heart, '*My Father* made them all.'"

Then she went to prepare for her journey; her little valise was soon packed, for her stay was only to be till Saturday, and her wardrobe was not so extensive that she need take long to make her choice of such things as she would require for Silverbeach. Ralph had promised to drive her; but when she looked from her window, the last thing, hearing the wheels of the light pony carriage that was to convey her to Allan Bridge, she saw—to her surprise, and not by any means to her satisfaction—that Philip Warner was drawing on his gloves, and then stooping to

fasten a loose strap, and examine the harness generally, as if he were preparing to be her charioteer.

When she came down it was explained to her that Ralph was called away upon unexpected business, which could not be postponed, and Philip would be "delighted" to take his place. So much attention from *Philip* was really astonishing; nevertheless, Clare was really pleased, she had taken no little pains to propitiate the gentleman; ever since that Sunday when she had overheard him giving vent to his uncomplimentary opinions respecting herself, she had determined, almost sworn to herself, that she would bring him to her feet, and make him her devoted slave; and till to-day she had not perceived the remotest chance of coming success. Surely, this willing acceptance of Ralph's undertaking was a sort of pledge of what might be—surely she might congratulate herself on having seemingly driven in the small end of the wedge; presently, if she exercised due discretion, if she wrought judiciously, and scientifically, even, she would be able to strike home. She remembered that some cynical writer had declared that "every woman has her price," and she felt quite certain that every man must have his vulnerable point. Philip Warner, therefore, must have his. And she thought, if she gave herself to the task, she could scarcely fail to discover it. She had plenty of tact and perception, and she was not wanting in patience, nor did she lack a certain gift of self-repression, when it became, as she deemed it, indispensable.

She bade her cousins farewell with a light heart. Her cousin Robert had already said "good-bye," so she had not even his presence to cast a shadow on the brightness of the hour. The others were only solicitous that she should enjoy herself; and as Philip gathered up the reins and signalled to the pony, she waved her hand and laughed out of the exuberance of her spirits. Clare's moods were very variable, and she was easily impressed for the moment. A drive through the beautiful country before her, on such a morning, and with the prospect of a pleasant visit at the end of her journey, was certainly exhilarating. Having, as it were, impressed Philip Warner into her service, contributed not a little to her content.

At the very last moment, just as Philip was preparing to mount, Cousin Margery called to him from the porch, "Be sure you take Clare to Tiffany's, and give her a nice little luncheon, Philip. You have plenty of time, and she will want something before she gets to Silverbeach ; travelling gives one an appetite."

And Philip answered, "All right ; we shall have a good half-hour to spare, if little Bobby goes at his usual pace. I will take every care of Clare, auntie, and see her safely under Lady Forest's wing."

"But Lady Forest will not meet me till I reach Weathersfield," said Clare, as they drove out into the high-road.

"I know," he replied ; "and I shall go to Weathersfield with you. I shall enjoy a short railway journey to-day, and my lady might *not* meet you, you know. We will let your kinswoman see that we take proper care of you."

"I have been obliged to take care of myself for many months past—ever since dear papa's death. And yet I cannot say I like the *rôle* of 'an unprotected female.' One may grow accustomed, I suppose, to what one secretly deprecates and protests against. Yes, I am glad to think you will not leave me to my own devices when we get to Allan Bridge. Only I am concerned to be the occasion of so much trouble to you."

"I do not feel it to be a trouble, I assure you."

"But time is valuable. I heard Tessie, only yesterday, lamenting that you have not leisure to attend to something you wished to undertake. You will lose a whole day through me."

"Never mind ; I shall not count my day lost, I assure you ; are you quite comfortable ?" Clare graciously assured him that she was, and thoroughly enjoying her drive. At the same time she marvelled at the sudden change which appeared to have come over Mr. Warner, and wondered what had converted a too self-complacent, discourteous, unpolished young man into her *cavalier servente*. But in whatever way the transformation had been effected, it was certainly very pleasant, and she gave herself up to the unexpected felicity of the hour.

'It was a beautiful drive to Allan Bridge, and she felt

almost sorry as she beheld the widening of the river as it approached the estuary ; she would have liked to be driven all the way to Silverbeach. But that could not be ; and she enjoyed her brief stay in the old-fashioned little town extremely. Philip took care that she had a nice little luncheon at Tiffany's, and then, having a few minutes still to spare, he escorted her through the principal street of the town, and showed her round the exterior of the grand old parish church, and bought for her the choicest bouquet the quaint market-place afforded. He made himself so very agreeable that she was really sorry when, after what appeared to her to be but a very short journey, the train stopped at the rustic little station of Weathersfield.

CHAPTER XI.

LITERARY PEOPLE.

“ None but an author knows an author’s cares,
Or fancy’s fondness for the child she bears.”

PHILIP handed Clare into the carriage, in which sat my Lady Forest awaiting her expected guest ; her ladyship pressed him to go with them to Silverbeach, and take some luncheon, but he politely declined ; the return train would be due in less than half-an-hour, he wished particularly not to miss it ; and he turned towards the station, while Miss Darlington and her stately relative pursued their way to Silverbeach. They had not gone far, and the customary courtesies had scarcely been exchanged, when Lady Forest inquired who was that remarkably handsome and altogether striking young man.

“ His name is Philip Warner, and he is distantly related to Mrs. Robert Darlington,” replied Clare. “ He kindly undertook to escort me on my journey ; my cousin Ralph,

who was to have driven me to Allan Bridge, was required on some other business."

"I do not know that I ever met a finer-looking, more aristocratic young man. I was going to congratulate you on having so very charming a cousin. But perhaps he is your *futur?*"

"He is *not*," replied Clare, rather curtly. "He is simply an acquaintance; not even a friend."

"Oh, I thought, perhaps—but tell me, my dear, are you engaged to be married?"

"I am *not*," again returned the young lady, decisively, for she did not much relish this inquisitorial examination. "Why do you ask, Lady Forest?"

"Simply because I take an interest in you, my dear—a deep interest! You are Clare Darlington, and so am I—of the same race, though of different generations, and you ought to marry *well*."

"I am afraid I shall not, for I have no money—or next to none. Girls with fortunes have their matrimonial futures very much in their own hands."

"Your face is your fortune, my dear. And being who you are—a *Darlington*—sprung from the Chalkshire Darlings, and connected, not remotely, with the present head of the house, you ought—you really *ought*, to make a brilliant marriage. You must not remain buried alive, a mere 'maid of the mill!'"

There was something in Lady Forest's words, and in the peremptory air with which they were spoken, that repelled Clare, in spite of herself; one's personal prospects were scarcely to be discussed at a second interview, and probably within hearing of the stalwart coachman, who might listen if he chose; though he seemed to be bent only on the management of the fine pair of young horses he was driving.

"If you please," resumed Clare, with a dignity that rather startled her companion, "we will converse on some other subject. How is Miss Argles?"

"About as provoking as ever. I was so exasperated with her this morning that I could have beaten her—I believe I *did fling* her totally illegible manuscript *at her*. I lost my

temper entirely. Of course she cried till she could hardly see out of her eyes—I believe she will go blind if she persists in shedding such floods of tears on every little provocation. She is not qualified for the situation, and I was a fool ever to have engaged her. Then, she is not a gentlewoman."

"But did you know who she was before she came to you?"

"Oh, yes, I knew she was a nobody. But a clergyman's wife, who was supposed to be her referee, and who volunteered to furnish the necessary testimonials, infamously deceived me. She said she would do very well for a private secretary, and she writes like—like a washerwoman. She testified to her having a fair knowledge of French, and she can't spell a word of the language, nor even understand what is dictated to her. She has the insolence to say that my accent is quite unlike anything she ever heard before ; I am thoroughly tired of her—I want a more liberally educated person—a young person, too, who will be not only an amanuensis, but a companion. I want a linguist—and a lady, *not* an animated water-cart."

"Is Miss Argles your first secretary ? "

"Well, I have hitherto always inquired for a *companion* ; but I had not got far into my novel when I discovered that I must secure the services of an amanuensis, for my own sight is *weak*. Somebody told me that Miss Argles was a most worthy person, and so I dare say she is, when she is not crying her eyes out of her head. She had' seen better days, I was informed ;—I hate people who have seen better days ; they are always making a moan and a wail over their misfortunes. In fact, I engaged Argles pretty much out of charity. I declare it is enough to sicken one of trying to be charitable. People should not be unfortunate ; Heaven helps those who have the sense and the spirit to help themselves."

Clare was silent, and pitied Miss Argles with all her heart ; she seemed doomed, she thought, to something a little worse than Egyptian bondage. That she was not an efficient secretary there could be little doubt ; her writing was "a niggle," and she was palpably weak-minded. It

must be exasperating to see an elderly spinster crying continually, like an ailing baby. But then, Lady Forest on her part was "*trying*"—a descriptive adjective which might mean a great deal—and in all probability the poor old maid had not a fair field.

"I suppose these Darlings of the Mill keep no carriage worth speaking of?" said Lady Forest, after a pause.

"They have a nice roomy wagonette, and a handsome pair of horses," replied Clare; "besides the pony carriage in which I travelled to Allan Bridge this morning, and the young men's dog-cart, which is a vehicle not to be despised."

"Indeed! I had no idea that millers ever cut such a dash. I should have thought their most important turn-out would be a heavy cart to carry the sacks of flour, supplemented by a decent specimen of that curious hybrid thing that is usually classed as a 'trap.' It is the conveyance most affected by tradespeople, I believe."

"Probably. I know nothing of tradespeople, except across the counter."

And again there was a certain something in Miss Darlington's clear, incisive tone, that startled her newly-found cousin, and made her understand that however "effective" as an amanuensis, she would not be a very easy tool to work with. On her part, her ladyship spoke with an acerbity and a covert sarcasm that was not, to make the best of it, particularly agreeable. Clare wondered what it might be to be always exposed to the raking fire of Lady Forest's unrestrained venom; to dread perpetually the bomb-shells of her unchecked anger, the frequent grape-shot of her bitter reproaches and her stinging comments.

But, after another silence, there was a change in the subject of conversation. Lady Forest ceased to discourse about Miss Argles and herself, and began to describe the plot of the novel on which she was engaged. The scene was laid in the stirring days of the First and Second Pretenders; and she had conceived a most dramatic description of the battle of Culloden, which was to surpass all the pen-and ink sketches ever given to the world. The embryo authoress had certainly a good conception of "word-

painting," and her style promised to be eloquent, if sometimes a little involved; she valued herself much on her pure and faultless English. She found herself "most at home," she assured Clare, in the philosophical discussions with which her tale abounded, and she spared no pains to be perfectly accurate in all historical allusions. *But*, like many another writer of our latter-day nineteenth century, she could not fix upon a *title*! And she almost tearfully, and altogether pathetically, implored her young relative to help her in this most painful emergency.

"For you know, my dear," continued her ladyship, "the thing *must* have a name; the printers won't print it—the publishers won't publish it, unless it has some sort of title. I thought of calling it 'No Name,' to save trouble, you know; but Argles assures me that is already appropriated by Wilkie Collins, or Charles Dickens, she cannot be quite certain which. Tell me, my dear, did you ever hear of such a work? Argles may be mistaken; she is so very stupid."

"She is right, however, in this instance. There is a novel called 'No Name,' and, I think, by Wilkie Collins; and titles, as of course you are well aware, are *copyright*."

"What is 'copyright'? I never could quite understand."

"Copyright, as far as I comprehend such matters, is an author's or publisher's property in any printed book or article, and it cannot be infringed without running the risk of an action at law. The *title* of the book, as well as its contents, are certainly copyright, and may not be appropriated by any one except the legal owner. I know so much from the discussions I used to hear between dear papa and the publishing people with whom he used to take counsel."

"My dear Clare, Heaven has certainly sent you to me in the hour of my extremity. I was never much of a business woman; I am only literary—*purely literary*; that is what the Darlingtons, as a family, are, you know. Pray, have you ever published on your own account?"

"Never," said Clare, unhesitatingly—a negative that seemed rather to rejoice the heart of her auditor, for she did not care to be discussing her schemes with a possible rival; she wanted a coadjutor, an adviser, and nothing more.

The truth being, that Clare, although she had never

published on her own account," or even dreamed of such a thing, had hoped privately, once upon a time, to enjoy the exquisite delight of seeing herself in print. Alas ! to plan a successful novel and to write it are two distinct and very different things. Clare found, when she had written but a score or two of pages, that she had set herself a far more arduous task than she had at all imagined. It was not so easy to write faultless English as she fancied ; she could not satisfy herself, for her style was either too diffuse or too severe ; and her sentences were continually getting involved, and her meaning just a little confused. Clare was her father's own child, and she had no idea of giving to the world anything but her very best ; she could not write up to her own standard ; her own criticisms mercilessly condemned her. The result was much writing and re-writing, much utterly fruitless "ink-shed," a wonderful consumption of scribbling paper, and, after all, a dreadful sense of failure and incapacity. Three times had she reconstructed the plot of her story before the second chapter was finished ; and then, to her utter dismay, she discovered that she should never—*never* be able to work out the situations she had planned. At the rate, too, at which she was progressing, it would take—not weeks, as she had fondly supposed—not months, but *years*—long, weary years, to arrive at the conclusion of her novel. She would be quite an elderly woman, grey-haired and wrinkled, before she could write those magic words, at the bottom of her final page,—THE END.

And, meanwhile, she must live, and *not* at Kilmarnock Gardens ; *côte que côte* she would leave the Stewarts. She would take humble lodgings, in a poor neighbourhood, and live on her scanty pittance as best she could, till she had achieved the triumph of full success. But that would take so long, that when the time came she would have lost the capacity of really enjoying herself ; doubtless practice would make more perfect, and she would wield a more fluent pen as time went on ; nevertheless, she could not afford to wait for a future, which after all might turn out to be a *mirage* ; the three-volume novel must be abandoned, and she must try her 'prentice-hand on something a little less ambitious.

So Clare Darlington began, and in due time *finished*, a pretty little story, or sort of *nouvelette*, and with many misgivings sent it to the office of one of the leading London magazines. And she was so tired, so worn out by the strenuous and persistent efforts she had made to bring her labours to a profitable conclusion, that she felt she could never make another attempt should this one fail. She had not long to wait—the sickness of lingering suspense was not to be hers ; in rather less than a fortnight her precious venture came back to her very much as she had sent it away ; apparently only a very few pages had been read.

She quickly resolved to make another attempt, while the old childish rhyme rang changes in her head, *try, try again*. And she did try again, and yet again, and the unfortunate offspring of her brain was still running the gauntlet of publishers and editors, she scarcely knew where. Nor did she care very much to know ; she had lost all confidence in her powers, she was beginning to feel a certain disgust for her own vagrant bantling. She had taken care, however, to give due notice to the firm to whose care she had committed the story, of her change of residence, and she had communicated her new address lest it should be returned “Declined” to 27, Kilmarnock Gardens, its very outward appearance betraying to her enemies her most cruel disappointment. She wished now she had written upon it “to be left till called for,” then it would have plagued her no more, but reposed in peace through immemorial years, smothered in dust, and growing more and more discoloured on that topmost, out-of-the-way shelf, which divides the last honours with the editor’s *waste-basket*.

So, very truthfully, Clare could disclaim all *éclat* of authorship ; and yet her cruel, and scarcely bygone experiences awoke within her a deeper and truer interest in Lady Forest’s cherished work than would otherwise have been the case. She envied her, too, for she would not be obliged to run the gauntlet of censorious publishers, who objected to running the risk of introducing an unknown author, an unaccredited candidate for fame. The speculation would be entirely her own ; she would only have to make choice of the most promising publishing-house in town, and simply

guaranteeing the cost, wait calmly for those interesting precursors of her book, the author's *proof-sheets*. The bitter mortification, the heart-sickness, the disappointment would not be hers. How pleasant, how very pleasant, it must be to be rich ! She had been told that "money breeds money," and that "to him that hath shall be given," and here was conclusive proof of the point in question ; the wealthy widow, who had plenty and to spare of this world's goods, could spend her gold as freely as she liked, and receive in return an argosy of gain ; while the best *she* could do would be to sell her loved productions for a certain sum of money, relinquishing to the lucky publisher the immense profit that would probably accrue. For Clare, though reconciled now to the chagrin of non-appreciation, felt assured, in her heart, that her abandoned novel, as well as her rejected magazine-contribution, needed only to appear in print to take the world by storm, and to secure her fortune *and* the publisher's.

And now they had a beautiful view of the ocean, rolling its sunlit waves at the foot of the great cliff that enclosed the little bay of Silverbeach ; and they paused in their talk of manuscript and publishers to admire the unwonted grandeur of the scene—the emerald verdure of the down they had just crossed, the flower-fringed scarp by which they were slowly descending to the shore, the vast blue, stainless sky, and that tiny village, with its white houses and white church to match, standing almost, as it seemed at that distance, at about high-water mark.

"What a lovely place !" said Clare, her eyes dilating with happiness as she gazed ; "it is so charming to be able to look all around you, over land and sea. I have felt so shut-up of late ; at first, in a monotonous London suburb, and then in the depths of a valley surrounded by high hills—this is indeed delightful."

"I am glad you like it," returned Lady Forest, graciously. "I feel as if I had absolutely created the place, for mine is the credit of its discovery, in the truest sense of the word. Nobody thought of coming here a few years ago, when, quite by accident, I came down for a little seclusion, and lighted—I scarcely know how—on Silverbeach. I am a little reticent

at present as to its superior attractions, for I don't want to be invaded by tourists and a miscellaneous crowd while I inhabit Silverbell Cottage. When I have quite finished my book, when I am tired of seclusion and want a change, I shall write the place up, and make its fortune. In the meantime, I congratulate myself on having found so retired and salubrious a spot, where I may devote myself—secure from interruption—to the fulfilment of my most important task. Ah, if I could but find a kindred spirit to share with me the solemn, holy toils to which I am pledged, how happy how thrice happy I should be ! I often quote the poet, when, alone in the twilight, my ever-busy pen laid aside, I gaze over the wide waste of the ever-moving waters, and ejaculate—

“ ‘ How sweet, how passing sweet, is solitude ! ’
and then I add mournfully—

“ ‘ But grant me still a friend in my retreat,
Whom I may whisper, Solitude is sweet.’ ”

“ Yes, I know that solitude, after a short experience of it, becomes wearisome. And one may be as much alone, nay, more sadly alone, surrounded by one's fellows, than in a nook like this.”

“ Ah ! you have experienced it. I see it in your face. Clare, my dear, we are kindred spirits ; I felt it the moment I looked at you, the instant I heard your voice, when I little guessed that the same proud blood flowed in your veins as in mine. Ah, our lives *must* blend in one ; we are formed to dwell together.”

Clare was spared the necessity of a reply by the carriage giving a tremendous jolt as it neared the bottom of the rocky path. Lady Forest gave a little shriek, and apologised on the ground of her too sensitive, too exquisitely-strung nerves ; and then, before the conversation could be resumed, the horses were turning into the little, trimly-kept drive of rose-wreathed, clematis-mantled Silverbell Cottage. A smart page appeared at the door, and assisted the ladies to alight, and behind him was Lady Forest's maid, ready to receive her mistress. Miss Argles was nowhere to be seen.

Dinner was served in a pleasant dining-room shaded by

a trellised verandah, and commanding a most delightful prospect ; and Lady Forest explained that early dinner was desirable in leading a literary life, especially in an out-of-the-way place like Silverbeach. She had dined at two o'clock ever since she settled at the cottage, taken tea at six, and supped at nine ; "thus you see, my dear," she concluded, "I have abandoned myself to a simple life ; I live like the rustic villagers, 'the world forgetting, by the world forgot.' If I had one sweet friend, one soul-companion, I should ask no more."

It was quite a sumptuous little repast of which the two ladies partook, and when the covers were removed, they waited upon themselves, in delightfully free-and-easy fashion, no servants remaining to impose any restraint upon the conversation. They had arrived at the dessert, when Clare suddenly remembered Miss Argles, and inquired for her.

"Oh, Argles never dines with me, unless I especially invite her," was Lady Forest's reply ; "I cannot be worried with her at meal times. I can't help snapping at her a little ; she is so very preposterous. And she cannot help crying, just like a pettish, chidden child ; and that so thoroughly disturbs me, that in self-defence I dispense with her company. It is so bad for one's digestion to be irritated at meals, and it is ruin to one's literary powers to be assailed by dyspepsia. She dined comfortably enough an hour ago in Tarleton's room—Tarleton is my maid, you know. Argles is dreadfully inclined to be bilious, and every now and then she has sick headaches that thoroughly prostrate her, and render her *hors-de-combat*. If on no other account, I should get rid of her. I can't endure ailing people ; bilious old maids are a dreadful nuisance. I hope you are *never* bilious ?"

"I do not think I am of a bilious constitution," replied Clare ; "I believe I do not really know what indigestion is unless I am dreadfully fatigued, as I was after my long journey from North Tyburnia to the Abbey Mill. Still, I am not quite a stranger to headaches."

"Depend upon it, they are neuralgic. All highly-toned and sensitive people are afflicted with neuralgia. I am a martyr to it ; all our family are. Neuralgia is a patrician affection ; biliousness is simply plebeian—revoltingly vulgar. I am

sure Argles over-eats herself, and I don't scruple to tell her so ; I never mince matters with *her*. And I insist on her observing a very simple regimen ; nothing suits her so well as cold roast mutton and rice or tapioca pudding. Wine puts her out of sorts, I have observed, and coffee does not agree with her. I have desired her never to indulge in either. I limit her to one glass of claret on Sundays. She is at liberty to take as much weak tea as she likes, and nothing else in the shape of liquid, except cold filtered water—I am very particular about her drinking *filtered* water. I should have her ceaselessly on the sick list if she were allowed to partake of three courses, like an ordinary being. But don't concern yourself about Argles ; I have given her a holiday while you're here ; I shall not require her presence at any time, but if I want her I can send for her. So I trust she will take the hint, and not trouble us with her company. She was fretting this morning, Tarleton tells me, because she had got it into her head that there was a chance of you taking her place."

"She need not disquiet herself," said Clare, coldly ; "I will tell her, if I come across her, that I am returning to the Abbey Mill on Saturday, at the latest ; and that I am engaged to my cousin, Mrs. Robert Darlington, for the whole of the summer."

"Pray tell her nothing of the sort ; it will do her good to realise the utter uncertainty of her tenure of office ; and I hope you will consider your decision before you return to Duston. I am certain that you and I are formed for each other. You are not a betrothed maiden, you tell me, and I am a lonely widow, childless and desolate. Have pity on me, Clare ; remember that I am of gentle blood ; I am well dowered. Come to me, and be my friend, companion, and *daughter*."

CHAPTER XII.

AT SILVER BEACH.

‘ I hate dependence on another’s will,
 Which changes with the breath of ev’ry whisper,
 Just as the sky, and weather with the winds :
 Nay, with the winds, as they blow east or west,
 To make his temper pleasant or unpleasant.’”

ON the whole, Clare’s visit to Silverbeach was not disagreeable, yet it was with a mixed feeling of relief and depression that she awoke on Saturday morning, and began to think of her return journey. She arose earlier than usual, in order to enjoy a stroll upon the shore, and to drink in once more the invigorating sea-breezes. Lady Forest was not visible till nine o’clock, as a rule ; though sometimes, when visited, as she supposed, by the divine *afflatus*, she would rouse her amanuensis betimes, and pride herself on accomplishing several hours’ work before breakfast.

Her literary labours, however, had been entirely suspended since Miss Darlington’s arrival : moreover, the first volume of the novel had happily come to a conclusion, and it behoved the authoress to take a few days’ rest and a little breath before actually commencing the second. Miss Argles, therefore, had been blessed with an unwonted holiday—a holiday such as she very rarely enjoyed, her patroness having distinctly told her to go her own ways, and not trouble herself about her ordinary work till it was signified to her that the time had arrived for its resumption. She might even “go home” for a few days if she pleased ; but poor Argles had no home, no friends whom she could presume to visit at a moment’s notice ; and added to this was a lurking fear—not altogether unfounded—that once at a distance she might never be recalled—never be permitted to return to her “situation,” for Lady Forest always contrived to keep her in a state of constant preparedness for

prompt dismissal, hinting perpetually at probable and swiftly-coming changes.

It so happened that Clare and Miss Argles had not met, whether by design or by accident the former could not decide ; but she thought it not at all improbable that the unfortunate secretary had been desired on no account to intrude herself on Miss Darlington, and to keep altogether out of sight. But that morning both their steps had been bent in the same direction, and at a certain slab of stone just above high-water mark, sheltered by the overhanging cliffs and commanding a fine view of the bay, they met.

"Good-morning, Miss Argles," said Clare, pleasantly, as she extended her hand ; "why you are the first person I have encountered taking an early stroll. Do you generally walk out before breakfast ?"

"Not often," replied Miss Argles, with just a suspicion of *snuffles* in her voice, as if she had recently been indulging in tears. "My time is not my own, generally speaking, but while you are at the Cottage I am quite at liberty ; my lady has granted me a real holiday during your stay ; she has released me entirely, so that I need not hold myself in readiness to respond to her summons. Indeed, I have not touched pen or paper since this day week, after tea, when the first volume of the novel was finished. Do you know when my lady purposes to resume her literary labours ?"

"No, I do not ; though she has talked to me a great deal about her novel—about the development of her plot, which, I must confess, is wonderfully intricate, and will require no little skill to work out cleverly—not to speak of the argumentative and philosophical chapters which she has in her mind to produce. I dare say you will be at work again, Miss Argles, on Monday."

"Do you go, then, to-day ?"

"This afternoon ! I shall be met by some one at Allan Bridge, so I must be punctual."

"Oh !" returned the amanuensis, with such a sigh of relief that it was impossible not to understand it ; "then I dare say we shall begin volume two on Monday morning ; we left off just where Flora has made up her mind that she

must leave Castle Inchin, in order to escape the persecutions of Hector Maclackie, who is on the Hanoverian side. Has my lady read any of the chapters to you, Miss Darlington? I know she intended doing so."

"Yes, she has read nearly the whole of the first volume, I think; and she has tried to give me some idea of the two as yet unwritten."

"Well, and what do you think of it all? *Will* it be the success she flatters herself it will be?"

"That it is impossible to predict," replied Clare, prudently; "one can scarcely form an adequate judgment of the whole three volumes from the first. I have known books that have proved entire failures open most brilliantly—it is only when an author has established a reputation, that a publisher will give even a glance at an unfinished work!"

"And you do not feel that you would like to devote yourself to it, Miss Darlington?"

"I do not think I quite understand."

"Why, to speak plainly, you would not care to take my place?"

"Certainly not; at present that is. I think now that you have commenced and advanced so far in the work, you had better carry on your labours to the end. No one else would enter into the spirit of the thing so well."

"You really and truly think so?"

"Or else I should not say it. Miss Argles, perhaps I had better tell you that Lady Forest *has* asked me to become her amanuensis, and that I have refused."

"Thank God for that!" ejaculated the secretary, the ready tears starting to her eyes. "Oh, Miss Darlington, I have been so unhappy—so afraid, that at last Lady Forest would carry out her threat and dismiss me with a month's wages. I know I do not write well—I always did *scribble* more or less, but I cannot help it. Still, if she did send me away, if I were to be suddenly—what she calls '*cashiered*'—I don't know what would become of me."

"Is there no other kind of situation that would suit you better than this one?"

"I am afraid not. As I told you before, I could not

teach because I am afraid I know nothing. I think they taught me badly in my school-days, and then I was idle, and did not take the trouble to learn things thoroughly. I learned French, but I have forgotten all about it. I learned music, but I can't play the simplest tune. I learned *grammar*, but I am sure I don't know what grammar is, except that it is divided into Orthography, Etymology, Syntax, and Prosody; and that doesn't help me. Sometimes my lady says to me, 'Argles, I don't believe you know your parts of speech'—and I *don't*; I am obliged to admit it. Then she will say, when, as I think, I have written from her dictation—'Argles, you idiot! do you know that sentence won't parse? It could not be analysed.' And I dare say it couldn't; I never can remember more than half-a-dozen words at a time; and she *will* dictate quite lengthy paragraphs without a pause. I am afraid I am good for nothing! It was a dreadful day for me when I lost all my money."

"It was, indeed! It is a sad thing to be poor."

"The saddest thing in the world, it seems to me, especially when you are getting old and no one cares very much about you. If Lady Forest dismisses me, as I know she will some day, I must starve or go into the workhouse."

And here the poor lady burst into tears and wept profusely.

"Miss Argles," said Clare, presently, "if you will excuse me, I will just say that I think it is more your habit of incessant weeping than your bad writing, or your false orthography, that exasperates Lady Forest. She is not, I think, really unkind; she would never allow you to be thrown on the world, friendless and penniless, as you seem to apprehend may be the case; but you do try her patience dreadfully when you cry so violently and so continually. You seem to be a perfect Niobe; only you are more likely to dissolve than to petrify."

"Who was Niobe? My lady is very fond of saying I am 'a Niobe.'"

Clare told her the story of Niobe, and ended by saying, "She had something to cry for, you see. It must have been very dreadful to lose all her children at once, and in such a

shocking way, you know. Still, I think she was a very great simpleton. There is nothing more unsatisfactory than crying—more entirely useless."

"You do not often cry, I suppose?"

"Very seldom; and I never allow myself to be reduced to tears by the unkind treatment of people for whom I have neither affection nor esteem. I have had my share of taunts and cruel reproaches, I assure you; but I never gave my enemies the triumph of seeing me in tears; my pride sustained me at least till I could be alone, and even then I always tried to discipline myself to composure: crying spoils your eyes and your complexion, and makes your head ache, besides incapacitating you from necessary effort. You make a spectacle of yourself, and expose yourself to deserved derision, and that is all you gain by tears—'idle tears!' Did you never read those lines?—

‘ Let us then be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labour and to wait.’

You cannot labour while you cry and sob, nor *wait* either, in the truest sense of the word; neither can you achieve, nor pursue, nor do any mortal thing that is of the slightest use. You only get into a state of saltish soak."

"Dear me, what a funny idea! And tears are very briny, and do make your cheeks sore. But surely, one *must* cry sometimes?"

"One must, indeed. There are times when you cannot repress your tears! I dare not think even now of my dear father; my eyes fill directly, and I feel as if I could weep my life away. But the idea of leaving Lady Forest is not an over-mastering sorrow, I should say; you are not deeply attached to her?"

"Oh, no, indeed! But pray do not tell her I said so; she might resent it, she is very quick to take offence, as you would find out for yourself, if you were unfortunate enough to serve her in any way. But I am such a poor creature; I am weak in every way; and, do you know, I am afraid good advice is wasted on me; I am too old to profit by it.

You must make yourself what you ought to be when you are young ; I would do my very best to reform and become wise and sensible if I were young again, which I never can be, alas ! I shall be sixty-three next birthday ; quite old, you see."

And Clare did not contradict her, for sixty-three *does* appear really venerable to twenty-one. And she concluded, rightly enough, that it was too late for her to cultivate the self-control and self-repression on which, nevertheless, her happiness, as well as her usefulness, so much depended. She felt, too, as if it were an impertinence in so young a woman to be lecturing and advising a person of poor Miss Argles's years. But alas ! years do not always bring experience ; fruit may hang upon the tree till winter storms shake it down, yet never ripen ! There is nothing in this troublesome, workaday world of ours more dismal to contemplate than "a grey-haired baby." And the tears of middle-age and advancing years are sad and destructive as late October rains.

Clare felt more sorry than ever for Miss Argles, when, on their return to Silverbell Cottage, she heard her soundly rated for "troubling Miss Darlington with her stupid company ;" and she felt how very painful it must be to the poor lady, who had "known better days," to be "kept in her place" like a pert menial, and chidden like a child. Her own experiences at Kilmarnock Gardens had taught her to be merciful.

Several hours later she had an opportunity of pleading poor Argles's cause. The carriage which was to convey her to Weathersfield had been ordered round, and Lady Forest was fidgeting about, and putting things in order, yet evidently intent on something which absorbed her thoughts, when she turned suddenly to Clare, and said persuasively, "You will come back again ? I want you to promise that you will."

"I willingly promise to pay you another, and, if you wish it, a longer visit before you leave Silverbeach. I have had 'a good time' here, as the Americans say, and I thank you heartily for the enjoyment ; I feel much stronger for this beautiful, bracing air. I shall go home quite rampant."

"Do you call that Mill place *home*?"

"It is home at present, and a very happy one. I do not say it is entirely congenial, but everybody is extremely kind."

"Still, it cannot be quite a proper home for your father's daughter. Richard Darlington was a man of refinement and culture—a man in advance of his day—an *aesthete*, in fact."

"I cannot expect to find a home like that which was naturally mine. I shall never find a man like my dear father; so I must make the best of what fate allots me. My father was a philosopher as well as a poet; and he always impressed upon me the wisdom of quietly accepting the *inevitable*."

"Very good advice, I am sure; it was just what the clergyman said to me when my poor dear Sir Raymond died. 'Madam,' he said, 'it is vain as well as impious to rebel against the dispensations of Providence; it is a Christian's duty meekly to accept the inevitable.' So I dried my tears and put on my widow's weeds, and accepted the painful inevitable with the best grace I could. But are you sure that your residence with the miller and his family is inevitable? Is it not also a Christian's duty to do the very best he can for *himself*?"

"I dare say it is; but then I am not a Christian."

"My dear, you shock me—I hope you are not a professed infidel."

"No, I am not. If I am anything, I suppose I am a Deist, for I do believe in God the Creator, the great First Cause, the Supreme Lawgiver of the Universe: but there is a wide difference between being a Christian and a mere Deist."

"No doubt there is, and really, my dear, you ought to speak to some clergyman and get your mind settled. Your father, however peculiar in his own views, ought to have seen to your being brought up a member of the Church of England."

"I believe I am a member of the Church of England. I have been christened and confirmed, and once—the Sunday after confirmation—I took the Sacrament."

"*Holy Communion*, my dear. It is not good form to speak of 'the Sacrament,' though of course it is a permissible way of expressing yourself."

"'Holy Communion,' then. Well, there it all ended. If conforming to certain rites and ceremonies makes an accredited member of the Church of England, I am one certainly."

"You may always call yourself one, assuredly, and I hope you will. It is not good form to be anything else ; scarcely respectable, indeed. I am very glad your father had you confirmed ; it is quite a comfort, I should say, having participated in all Christian rites, that you are a Christian. Pray, do not say to any one that you are *not* ; you might be misunderstood. *Mais, revenons à nos moutons.* Will you, or will you not, accept my offer ?"

"You have not made me any definite offer."

"I think I have—at any rate, I have implied it several times over. Will you come to live with me, not as a mere dependent, of course, like poor stupid Argles, but as my relation ? You will undertake some of Argles's duties, of course—you will help me with my novel—which, by the way, she does not—and I don't mind if I pay you a small salary."

"I should not think of relinquishing my freedom for board and lodging. Wherever I go I shall stipulate for a salary."

"Then you do think of making some sort of engagement ?"

"I am not decided. But at present I can do nothing ; I am pledged to remain at the Abbey Mill till the end of the summer. And besides—"

"Well ; besides what ?"

"There is Miss Argles ! would you retain her services if I came to live with you ?"

"Most certainly *not*. My dear, Argles is a perfect simpleton. She has no memory, she has little sense, she has had little education worthy of the name, and she would cry if she pricked her finger. Say you will come back to me in August, and *remain*, and I will give her a month's notice immediately."

"Then that settles the matter, for I will not be the cause of her dismissal. What is to become of the poor creature if she is thrown upon her own resources?"

"And why should I be burdened with all the 'poor creatures' in the world? That she is a poor creature, I grant you, about as fit to get her own living as that pretty Persian cat, who never scented a mouse in her life. Why, Argles is a *mollusc*; and I expect some day, when she has cried a little longer than usual, she will dissolve away and pass out of existence. I do not believe she has *a soul*, for the immortal essence resides, I am convinced, in the brain; and brain she has none, or next to none."

"Perhaps, if you were to have a little more patience with her, she might do better. I can see that she is very nervous, and most easily moved to tears. And really, Cousin Forest, if you scolded *me*, as you scold her, I should either cry my eyes out, or give you 'measure for measure'; and most probably the latter, for I am a Darlington you know, and we Darlingtons do not take kindly to snubbing. Cousin, you do scold her unmercifully; you must own that you do."

"Has she been complaining then?"

"I speak from the testimony of my own senses. I should not have noticed you in the Reading Room, I dare say, if you had not attracted my attention by your very audible reproofs. And only this morning you reprimanded her severely in my presence, and for no greater fault than that of going on the sea-shore at the same time as myself. If any one was to blame, it was I, for I followed her, I believe, not she, me. She could scarcely expect to see me there before breakfast. I must say, I think you showed unreasonable severity, Lady Forest; and if I took Miss Argles's place, you might treat me as unreasonably and severely; and, being made of quite different stuff, I might—most likely should—resent the treatment, and we should quarrel. I think you must see that we are better apart."

"No, I do not; you must not compare yourself with Argles; you would not give me the constant provocation she does. She has ruined my temper, and that is the long

and short of it. Yes, I dare say I am very cross ; and the longer she stays with me the worse I shall grow. She positively infuriates me sometimes. If it were not that I must have some kind of amanuensis while my book is in progress, I would send her off the first thing on Monday morning. As long as she is in my sight and in my hearing, I shall scold her, for very weariness."

"Could you not procure her another situation of quite another kind? I see that she cannot write, and she owns that she cannot spell. And when she is *flurried*, her nerves give way, and the little sense she has evaporates. Is there no kind of handiwork that she can do?"

"I call writing from dictation, and making notes from authorities, *handiwork*. I don't despair of seeing it done by machinery before I die. She can sew, I think ; and she can make very good beef tea, for she compounded some quite satisfactorily the other day, when Tarleton was in bed with faceache, and cook was away on her holiday. I never tasted better stuff of the sort in my life, and I told her so. She seemed as much pleased as if I had given her a bank-note."

"Perhaps, if you praised her a little, she would do better in every way."

"Perhaps so. But I am not going to praise her. I am tired of her society. As for you, Clare Darlington, I think you are a very foolish young woman. I offer you an eligible home in your own station of life, and you decline it—you scarcely know why. In my house, you will not take rank as a dependent; you will enjoy every comfort and every elegance; you will meet with the best society, and when my novel is finished, I will make it my first endeavour to establish you suitably in life. I dare say I can secure *a title* for you—at least a coronet in reversion."

"Thank you very much, cousin, but I have a strange prejudice against match-making."

"I said nothing about match-making, I despise it utterly. But I am your nearest elderly married relative, I have every reason to believe ; and though I should never dream of condescending to vulgar match-making, I am quite sure it is my duty—if you will not obstinately oppose me—to *establish you* as becomes a daughter of our house. And, without flattery,

you are singularly handsome, my dear, and you may, if you choose, make a most brilliant marriage, I am confident."

And then, to Clare's extreme satisfaction, the carriage appeared at the door, and the subject had to be abruptly dropped. The coachman had not been as punctual as usual, and they had to hurry to the station in order to catch the afternoon train, so that there was no opportunity for further conversation. And Lady Forest was certainly rather displeased. She said little, and that little was in a cold, nonchalant tone, as if she took small interest in her companion. Even at the station she preserved her dignified manner ; and when the moment of parting came, there was no renewal of the invitation which, a little earlier, had been pressed upon her. Clare could not but feel that she was in disgrace, though, whether she was glad or sorry, she could not determine. A formal adieu, as the train reached the platform, and her visit was over ; in another minute she was leaving Weathersfield behind her, and soon the suburbs of Allan Bridge appeared in sight.

She found, not altogether to her surprise, Philip and the dog-cart awaiting her in the station-yard. Again Ralph was prevented from attending upon her, he explained ; and the miller, who had promised himself the pleasure of driving over for her, was detained by the unexpected arrival of an old friend. Clare professed to be disappointed at Cousin Robert's detention ; but she really enjoyed her drive home extremely, and Philip made himself so very agreeable that she almost forgot her cause of offence against him.

CHAPTER XIII.

HARVEST HOME.

"Another harvest comes apace ;
Ripen our spirits by Thy grace,
That we may calmly meet the blow
The sickle gives to lay us low.
That so, when angel reapers come
To gather sheaves to Thy blest home,
Our spirits may be borne on high
To Thy safe garner in the sky."

WITHOUT exactly knowing why, Clare found a strange pleasure in the peaceful atmosphere of the place that she was learning, in spite of many inner protestations, to call—*Home*. It was a fine summer, and a great deal of it was passed out of doors ; quite a series of picnics and brief excursions was inaugurated for her benefit, that she might see as much as possible of the beautiful country all around her. Ruins seem to be quite a drug in that vicinity, for there were dismantled cloisters and dilapidated castles everywhere ; not very famous ones, it is true, such as figure largely in the tourists' guide-books, but still interesting, picturesque, and of easy access from the Abbey Mill. And while the brilliant weather lasted, there was no week in which the wagonette, well provisioned for the day, did not more than once come round to the ivied porch and bear away its smiling freight of girls, and at least one gentleman of the family.

But, of course, the innocent dissipation could not continue for ever : and, to confess the truth, Clare was getting tired of dining *al fresco*, and boiling kettles in secluded woodland haunts, long before the weather once more broke up, and condemned the young people to sober domestic life within four walls.

And then, when the rain was fairly over, and the woods more lovely and enticing than ever, the harvest began, and it seemed to Clare that immediately the whole world of Duston was transformed, and everybody, male and female,

young and old, masters and servants, could think and speak of nothing else but *crops*. Of course, the harvest was of the greatest importance to the country ; but the deep anxiety, and the straining of every nerve to accomplish certain tasks within a given time, at first astonished and then wearied her. At first she went with her cousins to the fields and watched the reapers, and on several occasions she volunteered to help carry refreshments to the men, and marvelled silently at the wholesale disappearance of bread and cheese and bacon and pie, and home-brewed ale. These country labourers rejoiced in abnormal appetites, she thought ; were they not very much like the animals they tended ? they ate and drank, and toiled and slept, and had clearly no higher aim in life than to do their duty to their master's satisfaction, and live in vulgar plenty.

She said as much one day to the miller, who had been talking about the coming harvest supper to his sons, and remarked that they were not very far superior to the cattle which browsed and fed, day after day, year after year, in the fields around them.

"I think, my dear, you scarcely do them justice," he replied. "Did you never hear the old saying, that it takes a lot of *all sorts* to make up a world ? Delicate china and costly porcelain are all very well in their way ; no one with any taste would care to dispense with them, and the good Lord has made all things that are beautiful as well as those that are useful for our enjoyment. But what should we do without the common Delft and the coarse brown ware that we freely handle without fear of breakage ? We can't eat and drink out of Dresden and Sèvres and Worcester every day of our lives ; and what should we do without common plates and cups and basins in the kitchen, especially if a dainty dinner were in progress of preparation ?"

"And we cannot do without common people, you would argue ? Well, I don't think we can ; there must be tillers of the soil and reapers of corn, and rough, dirty mechanics —they are very well *in their place*—only they should be kept in their place."

"And then the question arises *where* is their place, and where does God, the great Father of all flesh, mean them to

stand? I am afraid, Clare, we do not think sufficiently of this ; we do not ask ourselves what is the Lord's good will and pleasure concerning these toilers, whom we somewhat arrogantly call our inferiors."

"Cousin Robert, I do believe you would refer to God's will and pleasure if you were buying or selling a sack of potatoes."

"I hope I should, Clare ; nay, I am pretty sure that I should ; for one cannot be a Christian and at the same time keep one's 'earthlies' and one's 'heavenlies' in separate pockets."

"I do not understand you, cousin."

"Well, I must confess I was speaking a sort of parable ; but we often do speak in that way here ; we are used to it, and to each other's ways, you see. Did you ever read the poems of a certain Master George Herbert, who wrote long ago —a reverend minister of the Established Church, he was ?"

"I know there was such a person as George Herbert, of Bemerton, and I may have seen his book ; but I have no distinct recollection of anything he wrote. Why do you ask ?"

"Because I got from his writings, in the first place, my ideas of the celestial and terrestrial, which, to God's children, are certainly one and the same. I learned first from him that though the glory of the celestial and the glory of the terrestrial must be different, in one sense, they can never be antagonistic, because the higher is only the fulness and expansion of the lower."

Clare looked, as she felt, simply bewildered. Was this ethical, or metaphysical, or purely mythical discourse ? She had never in her life heard anything at all like it.

Mr. Darlington resumed :—"From him I learned—

' All may of Thee partake,
Nothing can be so mean
But for this tincture (for Thy sake)
Will not grow bright and clean.'

' A servant, with this clause,
Makes drudgery divine ;
Who sweeps a room as by Thy laws,
Makes that and the action fine.'

‘ This is the famous stone
 That turneth all to gold ;
 For that which God doth touch and own
 Cannot for less be told.’

It is very quaint, you hear ; and I am not quite certain that I quote it *verbatim*, for it is a good while since I had the book in my hand.”

“ And the verses teach—*what?*”

“ That there is nothing in the whole world—nothing in common daily life—so low, so mean, that it may not be turned to God’s glory. Sweeping a room may be an ordinary, perhaps a *compulsory* piece of vulgar drudgery, *or* it may become an act of devotion far more acceptable to God than a whole month’s matins and vespers sung morning and night by those whose sole idea of worship is the singing of canticles, and the offering up of ceremonial prayers.”

“ It is an odd idea, though, that *work* can be religion. How can a servant *sweep a room* to God’s glory ? ”

“ By doing it cheerfully and thoroughly, by taking all possible pains with that portion of the day’s duties which Providence has allotted her. It is her work to sweep the room quite as much as it is the Prime Minister’s work to guide the helm of State, and both are equally honourable in kind ; the ploughman and the prince can do no more than their absolute duty, and when the day’s work is done, God will say to the one, as to the other, ‘ Well done, good and faithful servant.’ ”

“ It seems very strange doctrine to me ; but then I have never been accustomed to think of such things—to go to the very bottom of them, as you appear to do. Cousin, I wonder you find the days long enough for so much thought.”

“ They are not long enough, Clare ; life is not nearly long enough for all we have to do and reflect upon. That is one reason why I feel sure of another and better existence, when I shall be able to carry out all I have so feebly and ignorantly commenced here. Time is but a drop in the ocean of Eternity. Ah, child, it is a madman’s freak to live for time alone ; to make your ‘earthlies’—going back to our first simile—so *very earthly* that they

cannot blend with the ‘heavenlies,’ and by-and-by become one and the self-same thing. And now I must leave you, Clare, for my duty is in the field to-day, and God calls me there as loudly and distinctly as He calls me to prayer, or to the services of the sanctuary. And remember, my dear, that all creatures of God have their uses, and have a place of honour in His wide temple of the world. Even the birds of the air sing *His* praises.”

And the miller went away, leaving Clare to her meditations. She was more and more perplexed ; the mode of life at the Mill was quite unlike anything she had ever known before ; *religion*, in some shape or other, seemed to underlie all the actions and all the discourse of the busy household—duties and pleasures alike were instinct with a spirit which she could not in the least comprehend. And yet there was certainly no gloom in the family life ; there were no cant phrases, no denominational shibboleths continually exchanged among them ; mirth was never repressed by the elders ; there was plenty of amusements of one sort or another going on, and even duties seemed to be welcomed as recreations. What was the key to it all ?

It was pleasant to look forth from her chamber window on the waving corn, and to see the reapers going up and down, sickle in hand, among the sheaves. And by-and-by the work was done, the golden grain was ready to be gathered in, and the labourers were preparing to shout “Harvest home !” It need not be remarked that this also was a novel experiment to Clare Darlington ; she had never “assisted” at a harvest-supper.

But on that same morning a rather strange thing happened ; she was sitting in the field, with her *Tennyson* in her hand, the page open at the exquisite poem of “Dora,” and her eyes wandering to the scene before her, where the reapers, followed by the gleaners, were busy with the last of the sheaves, when some one from the house approached to summon her, as she supposed, to the early dinner. “Please, Miss Clare, there is a lady in the house asking for you.”

“For *me*?” responded Clare, very much surprised ; and then, wondering whether it might be Lady Forest, who had

half-laughingly threatened a visit ; "but, Rachel, it must be a mistake, no one about here would ask for me. It must be Miss Darlington who is meant, or Miss Tessie."

"No, ma'am," returned the girl ; "the old lady inquired for Miss Clare Darlington, and she told me her name, only I cannot remember it ; it is a very queer one. She looks very hot and tired."

It certainly would not be her high and mighty cousin from Silverbeach, of whose welfare she had heard nothing since her return to Duston, the usual complimentary letter which she had written to announce her safe arrival at home having remained unnoticed. Clare had quite come to the conclusion that her peremptory relative was offended, and would not seek a renewal of intercourse. What was her astonishment to behold in her visitor no other than Miss Argles.

"Ah ! Miss Clare, you did not expect to see me," said the amanuensis, in her half-extinguished voice. "Oh, I am tired—*dead tired*."

She looked, indeed, excessively fatigued ; she was dusty and way-worn, and the ribbons of her shabby bonnet were about as limp as herself. Clare thought she must have *walked* from Allan Bridge.

"How did you leave Lady Forest ?" was the natural inquiry.

"Very well, and very busy," was the answer ; "she is at work on the second volume now, but she does not get on as she could wish."

"Nevertheless, she has given you a holiday."

"A holiday for good and all. I left her this morning, and I am never going back again. I did not tell her I was coming here, or she would, I dare say, have forbidden me ; and though I am no longer her dependent, I dare not disobey her."

"And how did you travel ? There is no regular public conveyance from Allan Bridge, except on market days."

"I came, of course, from Weathersfield by train, and when I got to Allan Bridge, I did not know how to get on, for I fancied there was a coach, or an omnibus, or

something, and there was not. 'I felt I never could walk five miles in this heat, and I was in despair, when a waggoner, who heard what a dilemma I was in, said, if I didn't mind going three miles or more in his covered cart, I could, perhaps, walk the rest of the way. You may think I was only too thankful ; so I accepted the good man's offer with gratitude, saw my luggage stowed safely away in the cloak-room at the station, and started again on my journey. The cart, however, shook me a good deal ; still, it was a great deal better than footing it all the way in the burning sun. But at the place they call the 'cross-roads,' where there is a finger-post pointing four different ways, you know, the man pulled up, and said, 'Now, missis, you must get out if you mean to go Duston way, I must take the road that leads to Settleham, and this be it.' So, of course, I got out, and the covered cart went one way and I another ; but, oh, dear ! I thought I never should get to Abbey Mill. I was afraid I had missed my way, and there was no one to ask, for the road seemed to be deserted ; I never met a creature, except a donkey with a clog on its hind leg, till I heard the rush of the waters, and the wheel, and knew that I must be close to the dam you talked about. And now, I am here, thank goodness ; but I think I never was so tired in all my life."

And the long story being so far ended, Miss Argles untied her bonnet, and began to fan herself with her pocket-handkerchief. Since she was not Lady Forest's messenger, Clare began to feel curious as to her errand, and she was just debating how to make further inquiries without seeming inhospitable, when Mrs. Darlington entered, and then the tale had to be told over again from the beginning.

"And so you have arrived to pay us a visit ?" said Cousin Margery, pleasantly ; "you had better come upstairs, and take off your things, for our dinner will be ready in less than half-an-hour. We are very happy to see you, Miss Argles."

At which demonstration of cordiality Miss Argles almost broke down ; but, thinking better of it, hurried her handkerchief into her pocket, as if the disposal of that would tend to stem the rising flood, and continued in a rather choky voice, "I am going back to Worcestershire, to the place where I was born, and I wanted to see Miss Clare

once again before I went. I wanted to thank her for all her kindness to me, for I don't suppose I shall ever revisit Moorlandshire."

"But I do not remember that I ever showed you any particular kindness, Miss Argles; I was only commonly *civil*."

"My dear young lady, you *spoke* kindly to me, and that was a great deal to a poor stupid drudge like me. Yes, I know I am very stupid! I should think a stupider person never lived, but a few kind, polite words do raise one's spirits, and make one feel one *might* do something, if one wasn't always being driven and scolded."

And again there were signs of tears in the poor dim eyes, and there was a very suspicious *snivel*; so Mrs. Darlington hastened to make a diversion by conveying her impromptu guest upstairs, offering her all needful toilet appliances, and a cap of her own to cover the limp grey curls, which the unwonted feat of pedestrianism had sadly dishevelled. Good Cousin Margery had been much interested in Clare's story of Miss Argles, and she was honestly glad to have an opportunity of showing her some kindness. She determined that, unless the continuation of her journey were imperative, the ex-secretary should remain her guest for that night, at least.

Clare was quite surprised at the improvement in her humble friend's appearance when she returned to the parlour, refreshed by indulgence in plenty of clean, cold water, with her grey hair neatly brushed back over her forehead, and covered with Cousin Margery's pretty, simple cap. She accepted the hospitality of her hostess's well-spread dinner-table with evident appreciation, and afterwards was only too glad to indulge in a little nap. When she awoke, in time for early tea, she was quite elate, and ready for conversation.

"We are going to celebrate our 'Harvest Home' to-night," said Mrs. Darlington, as the ladies sat together over their cups and saucers; "and you must not think of missing *that*. We shall be delighted—my daughters and myself, and my husband,—and Clare, too, I am sure, if you will agree to remain all night. There is no reason, I hope, why you cannot consent to join in our festivities?"

"None whatever," replied Miss Argles, greatly relieved to think that for the next few hours she need not proceed upon her journey, for which she was very inadequately prepared ; being a person who needed protection almost as much as a child, and not having the smallest idea as to what her next step should be after recovering her luggage at Allan Bridge.

"And have you and Lady Forest finally parted company?" was Clare's inquiry, as she, Cousin Margery, and their guest, still sat trifling with their teaspoons.

"Yes ; *quite!*" replied Miss Argles, composedly. "She got dreadfully put out yesterday, when I had finished some copying she gave me to do, and said it was *perfectly illegible*. I know it was very badly done, for I could not make it out very well myself ; and she declared it might be Chinese, or High Dutch, for anything she could make of it. And then she said she thought we had worried each other long enough, and she should have the temper of a wasp if we did not part ; so I had better there and then pack up my clothes, and take the 9.30 train for Allan Bridge, and go off at once to my own friends. But I have no friends, you know, ma'am ; so I cannot go to them."

"But what will you do, then?" asked Mrs. Darlington, quite aghast at the destitution of the feeble creature.

"Oh, I shall go back to Worcester ; there is a little village just outside the city, where I know I can get humble lodgings, and be very comfortable."

"Till you obtain another situation, I suppose?" said Mrs. Darlington, a little dubiously, and she wondered whether she would again seek employment as an *amamuensis*.

"I shall not think of a situation at present," said Miss Argles, composedly ; "I have plenty of money for a long while."

"I am very glad to hear it," responded the hostess, while Clare remarked, "Some sudden stroke of good fortune has visited you, Miss Argles?"

"Yes," she replied, complacently, clasping her poor, old, withered fingers ; "my lady has behaved most generously ; she has not, as I apprehended, when we conversed together on former occasions, Miss Clare, dismissed me with just the month's stipend, which was really not due for almost a

fortnight ; but has given me, besides, twenty pounds ! Yes fifteen sovereigns and a five-pound note, and a black silk that has never been turned—quite a handsome dress—and a good serviceable merino, very little the worse for wear. She said Tarleton would look to have them, but she would find her something else ; I should have them, as we were parting. Ah, she was very kind, and quite friendly when I said good-bye. Still, I did not tell her I was coming *here*, for she has all manner of crotchets."

"But," interposed Mrs. Darlington, "excuse me, my dear lady, does that twenty pounds and the month's salary constitute *all* your store ? "

"Every penny," was the quiet answer, "and I am quite content. I can live for a long while on nearly twenty-four pounds, for I had some money in my purse, that I had put by in case of emergency. Oh, I shall have plenty."

"Plenty for present necessities, no doubt ; but twenty-four pounds will not last long for decent board and lodging, especially when you have deducted travelling expenses."

"I shall make it do," she replied, confidently. "I am used to living on very little."

And Mrs. Darlington thought it best to say no more at that time, though she resolved to take counsel with her husband on the subject of the actual impecuniosity of their guest. Just then it was time for her to go out and give her attention to the final arrangements of the evening ; the men were beginning to arrive in their Sunday best, and the supper was laid out in a large kitchen not often in common use, and once the refectory of the monks long since passed away to their great account. With the labourers came their wives and sweethearts, and, in one or two cases, there were aged relatives, whose days of toil were over.

It was a happy and a mirthful gathering ; there was abundance of good fare, and no stint of the wholesome nut-brown ale ; but there was no *excess* of any kind. For one of the mill-men, or the farm-men, to be seen ever so slightly intoxicated was held to be a great and lasting disgrace.

Clare was much interested in these simple festivities ; she had helped with the floral decorations, and with the "button-holes" for the men, and the neck-bouquets for the girls and

women. And to the close of the feast no word was spoken that could bring a blush to fair cheeks, or indignation to virtuous hearts.

Miss Argles was simply delighted. She exclaimed again and again that she had *never*, in all her life, been at such a pleasant party ; and her happiness rose to its height when she was told off, with the ladies of the family, to wait upon the guests. But she and Clare were, for once, to be astonished in company. Clare was used now to, what she still designated, "impromptu prayer-meetings" ; but she was mightily surprised when she found that the Harvest-Supper was to terminate in something like a religious service.

It was still early when the great Bible was brought in, and the miller stood up and read the sixty-fifth psalm, gave a short address on God's special goodness to the tillers of the soil, dwelling emphatically on the closing verses : "*Thou* crownest the year with Thy goodness," &c.

And then came the well-known *Harvest Hymn* ; not so familiar, though, in those days ; and entirely strange both to Clare and Miss Argles.

"Wasn't it *beautiful* ?" said the latter, when all was over ; "I must copy those verses, if I may, please Mrs. Darlington ; and, above all, that last verse. I shall never forget it. But Miss Clare, your cousin Robert is a splendid man, and I shall never forget to-night. I suppose I ought to think that *He* led me to come here."

CHAPTER XIV.

“ TO BE, OR NOT TO BE.”

“ A spirit haunts the year’s last hours
 Dwelling amid these yellowing bowers ;
 To himself he talks ;
 For at eventide, listening earnestly,
 At his work you may hear him sob and sigh
 In the walks ;
 Earthward he boweth the heavy stalks
 Of the mouldering flowers.
 Heavily hangs the broad sunflower
 Over its grave i’ the earth so chilly ;
 Heavily hangs the hollyhock,
 Heavily hangs the tiger-lily.”

SEPTEMBER drew near its end ; already the evenings were closing in early, the mornings were dull and hazy, and the grass was dank and dewy all day long. The harvest, as we have seen, was safely gathered in, and so was the winter store of roots ; rosy apples and mellow pears still hung thickly on the gnarled, mossy branches of the old trees in the Abbot’s orchard, and hazel-nuts and blackberries were plentiful everywhere. The Mill garden was a desolation ; the neatly kept lawns were littered all over with the drifting foliage of beech and elm ; the flowers of summer had almost disappeared, and in place of June roses, luscious woodbine, and gay Canterbury bells, were tall, stately hollyhocks, great staring sunflowers, and crimson and yellow and white snap-dragons, vying with pretty, pheasant-eyed phloxes in cheering the decaying beauty of the year.

Miss Argles was still at the Mill ; she had accepted most thankfully the invitation she received from the heads of the house, to spend a few weeks with them before continuing her travels southwards. She made herself quite useful, and was never so pleased as when allowed to undertake some unimportant task, which seemed to her, however, *of the first importance*. She really could do some kinds of

plain needlework very well, and she was only too happy when she found out that some coarse mending was really waiting to be done ; and that she could do it quite respectably. Her satisfaction reached its climax one day, when the miller came back from Allan Bridge market with a little parcel of spectacles, from which she was to choose a pair just suited to her sight.

For Edith had discovered that the poor old maid was almost purblind, and that the only glasses she possessed to aid her dimmed vision were fitted for younger sight. She tried on several pairs with an air of solemnity that was really ludicrous, till at last she came to one, by aid of which she could read without difficulty the smallest printed hymn-book of the collection. Then her joy brimmed over in thankful tears, and she exclaimed, “ Why ! I can see as well as when I was a girl ; I could even do embroidery, I am sure. What wonderful things *glasses* are ! I should have written a great deal better, quite *legibly*, indeed, if I had had them before.”

“ And why did you not have them ? ” asked Clare, who had watched the scene with some amusement.

“ Well, my dear,” she answered, looking over her new spectacles ; “ you see, I never did think of things ; it isn’t in me, I suppose. It didn’t occur to me at all that my old spectacles were getting worn out, or, rather, that I was getting too old for them ; and then I was always crying ; and it’s really very difficult to see through even the best of glasses when they are wet and dim with tears. It’s just like looking through the window on a rainy, foggy day. But I do believe I should not have been so often in disgrace if I had been able to see as I can now. Mrs. Darlington, I shall be delighted to hem those new towels for you ! I am sure I can do them a great deal better than the sewing-machine, though Miss Tessie does give it such a character for perfect neatness.”

“ I wonder Lady Forest never suggested your trying other glasses ! ” said Cousin Margery. “ Does she not use spectacles herself ? ”

“ Oh, yes ; but then they are *gold-rimmed* ; I dare say they cost a lot of money.”

"The gold makes no difference, except in its own value," observed Mrs. Darlington, smiling; "a cheaper pair than those you have in your hand would answer the purpose quite as well as the most expensive, so far as the frames are concerned. You look through the glass, not through the gold."

"Dear me, so I do. How very stupid I am. I wonder if there is anybody in the world—who is not an idiot—*half* so stupid! It is dreadful to be such a foolish old thing."

"Then make haste and get wiser. It is never too late to mend. Suppose you make a beginning;—only I think you have begun already."

"And I almost think I have, myself; I have learned better ways of doing things since I came here; I have found out that I can be of some use in a house, and then, you don't scold me."

"Did Lady Forest *always* scold you?" asked Clare, thoughtfully.

"Well, *yes*. But then I was very troublesome to her, I dare say, and she had not much patience, and she thought everybody else was as clever as herself. I wonder if she has found another amanuensis."

"No," responded Clare, quickly, "she has *not*. I heard from her only this morning. She has made trial of one young person, who promised very fairly, she says, but who did not suit her at all. She was tolerably well-educated, but impertinent."

"How could she *dare* to be impertinent?" said Miss Argles, with bated breath. "I have heard my lady telling the servants that she never permitted the slightest disrespect; and she warned me from the very first never to presume to excuse myself, nor to dream of answering her again; and of course I never did."

"I think she might be the better for being 'answered again,' at least, now and then. She wants some one with a little spirit to deal with her; she is overbearing, extremely so, but I fancy she might be *managed*."

"Clare," said Mrs. Darlington to her, several hours later; "I have an idea that Lady Forest will try to secure *you* as her secretary. Some things that Miss Argles has

said, and a few words you have yourself let slip, make me think so.”

“She made me an offer, or rather, she renewed the offer of the post in her letter this morning. She is most anxious that I should live with her.”

“My dear, I hope you are not meditating such a step? I scarcely think the position would suit you.”

“In some ways, perhaps not. But Cousin Margery, my visit has been a long one, and it is quite time, I think, I found myself a home.”

“My dear, I hoped you were at home; we quite wished you to be one of ourselves.”

“You are very kind. You have been most kind ever since I came; but—but—”

“But what, Clare?”

“I ought not to be a burden on you and Cousin Robert; we Darlings have also a certain pride of our own; and we are naturally *independent*.”

“Independence is a good thing, my dear, but it may be secured at too great a cost. Besides, you will be in some measure under obligations to Lady Forest, and she is not a nearer relation than my husband is.”

“Perhaps. But I shall feel that I am earning my own living. I shall not be eating the bread of idleness.”

“Nor need you eat it here, Clare. We should be so very glad if you would take some little part in Lina’s education; you have had so many advantages that have not fallen to the share of my own girls. Edie and Tessie quite looked forward to reading French and Italian with you, and improving themselves in German also. There has not hitherto been much leisure, certainly, for the summer has been so beautiful, since the July rains passed over; but now we shall have the long winter evenings for reading and study; you need not feel, my dear, that you are useless in our midst.”

Clare was silent. She knew that what her cousin Margery said was the truth. She might help Edith in the school-room, and she might be of the greatest assistance to both the elder girls in the article of foreign languages, which, as a matter of course, she spoke much more fluently than they

did, and with far better accent. And Madeline was a clever girl, fond of study, and anxious for improvement ; though, being the youngest of the family, and perhaps a little spoiled, she was not quite so sweet tempered, so docile, and so unselfish as were her elder sisters.

But Clare had rebelled from the first against the seclusion, and the quiet homely life to which, at the Abbey Mill, she must be condemned. The religious tone of the household jarred, too, her feelings ; the simple pleasures that satisfied her rustic cousins palled upon her after a brief experience of them ; she was wearied with the monotony, as it seemed to her, of the uneventful days, and the unvaried calm of the family routine. She longed, with a silent but indescribable longing, for the world in which she had once borne her part ; she wanted intensely to mingle once more with "society," to taste once more the varied charms of the refined circles from which she had been so cruelly torn at her father's death. It was all very well to ramble by the beautiful Allan Water ; to explore its flowery banks, and its deep, umbrageous woods ; but she was tired of nature, although it was very fair and lovely ; and she "yearned," she told herself, for renewed intercourse with the men and women of her own order—the people with whom she could be in true sympathy.

But she could not exactly say all this to her cousin Margery ; she could not in common civility, still less with any show of gratitude, tell her how weary she had grown of the Abbey Mill and its kindly inmates. She longed for the Academy, the Theatres, the Lecture Rooms, the Parks, the Ladies' Mile, the Zoo ; for all the orthodox festivities of select Belgravian coteries with a longing she could not repress. And Lady Forest was returning almost immediately to town ; at her residence in Lowndes Square she contemplated the speedy completion of her novel ; and no one but her cousin Clare could be a perfectly satisfactory companion. She could only reply, as she had done before, that she disliked teaching, and that she had no genius for tuition, and that she did not think the country, especially in winter time, would suit her health. She had always been accustomed to town-life ; the idea of the coming

months, all misty, and hazy, and damp, filled her with dismay.

“Very well, my dear,” was Mrs. Darlington’s calm rejoinder; “if you really are bent upon leaving us, I will not seek to dissuade you; were you to be unhappy or out of health through the dreary season you so much dread, I should reproach myself if I had been in any way the cause of your remaining. But from little things I have heard from Miss Argles—nay, from what you have told me, yourself—I am afraid you will not be happy with Lady Forest.”

“Every situation has its disadvantages, of course, Cousin Margery; I am not foolish enough to look for unalloyed happiness. I certainly do not fancy Lady Forest is particularly amiable; she is decidedly imperious and overbearing in her manner, and I must say she treated that poor ‘Argles,’ as she called her, with scant courtesy. Still, you must allow that Miss Argles was by no means qualified for the duties she assumed, and she really is a very trying person, melting into tears on the smallest provocation. I am quite sure that yielding meekly to all my lady’s whims and caprices, is the very worst way of dealing with her. If I go to her, she will soon find that I am not to be insulted or ordered about with impunity. I, too, am a Darlington. I am her equal—not her humble companion.”

“If I were you, my dear, I would not put myself in the way of being insulted and ordered about, and I am afraid, from what I hear, that she will forget all about your rights as a kinswoman, &c., &c., when the first novelty of the engagement is over. *But*—I will say no more, you must decide for yourself only. I would advise you, almost *supplicate* you, to pause and reflect seriously before you commit yourself to a line of life that may be more distasteful and unpleasant than you foresee. Have you answered Lady Forest’s letter?”

“No; I felt some little hesitation, I must confess, and could not bring myself to reply on the spur of the moment. I put off writing till this evening, and now, I think it is too late; nor am I in the mood for correspondence to-night.”

“Wait, then, till to-morrow, or till the next day even; it is sometimes well to procrastinate. Who knows, but that the

whole aspect of affairs will appear to you quite differently to-morrow morning?"

"It may be so, though I think not. However, I will defer the letter till, at least, to-morrow *evening*. It would not do to pledge myself in black and white, and then cry off from my bargain. I should not like to be the first of the Darlingtons on whom the stigma of unreliability should rest. My answer *must* be final."

"Very well. Then I pray you take ample time to consider your answer. And Clare, my dear, *may* I beg you to ask to be *guided*?"

"Guided! By whom? I am quite ready to listen to cousin Robert and yourself; you are both, I know, absolutely trustworthy."

"I hope we are; we desire, I think, to deal faithfully with all our fellows. But, my dear, neither Robert nor I are *all-wise*. We may fail in our judgment, we are not very experienced persons; I was not referring to any mortal guidance—I meant to suggest that you should lay the matter before God, leave it in His hands, and pray that your footsteps might be *ordered*."

Clare was silent for a moment; then she said in a constrained voice, "You know, Cousin Margery I am not of your way of thinking. I believe in the existence of an omnipotent God and creator of the world, but I do not, cannot feel convinced that He troubles Himself about the way we take in the world, especially in such small and unimportant matters as the one now under discussion. What can it be to Him, the Ruler of the Universe, whether I return to London or stay on at the Abbey Mill?"

"And yet, Clare, He has numbered the very hairs of your head."

"Don't you think that is a mere figure of speech?"

"Probably it is; and what then? Our Lord meant to say that the Father exercised the minutest care over every human creature that He had made. *More*, over the beasts of the field and the birds of the air; not a sparrow falls to the ground without *His* permission. Does He not feed the ravens? Does He not clothe the lilies in their splendid array? Does He not take thought for the lowliest, and the

obscurest? and does He not concern Himself on your account, think you?”

“I don’t know, cousin Margery. I do not see how I can know, for certain.”

“I cannot argue, Clare; I can only say it is all in the Bible. I know no more, except, indeed, that I feel in my very heart that God *does* care for me, and watches over me and mine, with ceaseless tenderness and love. And I think, my dear, some day you *will* know; for He will teach you. He will send His Spirit to teach you all things, and to show you His truth.”

And then the conversation ended, and the important letter was left unwritten for that day, and for several succeeding days. Indeed, it was not to be written at all, for on the fourth morning Lady Forest appeared upon the scene, and peremptorily demanded of Clare “the meaning of her silence!” They were alone in the best parlour, and could have their talk to themselves. Clare told her that she hesitated, though, as she owned, greatly tempted, because she did not feel assured of the ultimate wisdom of the step.

“And I will tell you plainly, Lady Forest,” she continued, “that I neither would or could suffer the indignities which in my presence you have heaped upon that poor Miss Argles.”

“Pooh! Argles was a fool, an utter fool! It would have served her right had I shaken her out of the little sense she had. What has Argles to do with you? You will excel just where she failed; you have as much mother-wit as she has stupidity; you are as well-informed as she is ignorant. Besides, you are a *Darlington*; and that alone would commend you to my respect and affection. Come to me, Clare, and I swear to you you shall never repent it.”

“On what terms shall I come to you?”

“As my near relation—my home-daughter,—as ‘Miss Darlington.’ I cannot say more.”

“And what are to be my duties?”

“You will help me in my literary work, of course: you will write for me, work up subjects, look out authorities, verify references, and all that sort of thing. Also, I shall expect you to help me to entertain; we shall have musical

and æsthetical *réunions*, literary *soirées*, scientific gatherings : you will go out with me as my own daughter ; you will accompany me *everywhere*—to theatres, operas, balls, garden-parties, kettle-drums, abroad and at home—in fact, as I said before, *everywhere*. I shall be proud to chaperone so handsome and brilliant a girl—my own kinswoman too. You shall be ‘presented,’ of course, if that ceremony has not already taken place ; and I need not assure you that your proper establishment shall be my first concern. But, mind, I shall not be content with anything less than a coronet for you, or else an unexceptionable *millionaire*. You will not try to circumvent me, I know ; you are too sensible, as well as too highly-bred, to go and *fall in love* like a milkmaid, or a dressmaker.”

“ And what stipend do you offer ? ”

“ *Stipend !* My dear, you are terribly mercenary. I could not make a bargain with my own kinswoman. I quite thought you had a snug little income of your own.”

“ I have something of my own, certainly, but so little that I cannot depend upon it. It might suffice, if I stayed here, where dress is not required ; where a black silk, a grey Carmelite, and a white muslin or two, with pretty ribbons, would be ample toilet for all occasions. But if I go into society, as you propose, my income will just find me in gloves, and boots, and frills, and such trifles.”

“ I will find you dresses and bonnets. Madame Marie may send in her bills to me. Your things, generally, can be put down to my account. I have the best credit with the West-end tradesmen, as you will very soon find out.”

“ But, nevertheless, I must stipulate for a fixed allowance—daughters have their allowance, you know. I should wish to let my poor little pittance of less than £50 a year accumulate while I am with you ; I am prudent, I confess ; perhaps too much so, for my years, you will think ; but I have learned from painful experience the value of a little reserve fund in excess of one’s expenditure.”

“ But I assure you you shall want nothing, if you agree to my proposals. I will dress you beautifully—for like the man in Tennyson’s poems—‘I love that beauty should go beautifully.’ I will have some of my jewels reset for your

presentation—you shall wear my pearls and my emeralds. And I can spare you, even, some of my *diamonds*."

But still Clare fought womanly for her rights as a salaried companion ; and at last Lady Forest agreed to give her £60 per annum for "pocket money"—she persisted in promising the future supply of her best *toilettes*, and, above all, of the "Court dress" which would, of course, be necessary for her appearance at Her Majesty's "Drawing Room."

It was all settled at last, and her ladyship graciously consented to take luncheon before returning to Allan Bridge. She was evidently impressed by the "good style" in which these Mill folk lived ; she was obviously surprised at the sight of the well-served table, with its neat and pretty appointments, and she professed to be delighted with Mr. Darlington, "who really deserved to be a gentleman." The young men, too, she duly admired, and she praised the grace and beauty of the young ladies ; Philip she did not see, he had gone to attend a market, at some miles' distance.

Great, however, was her astonishment when she first beheld Miss Argles, as comfortably established as if she were "one of the family." Matters were soon explained to her, and she congratulated her ex-secretary on her unprecedented good luck, at the same time insinuating that she had managed her matters with inimitable address, and no small amount of *cunning*. And, indeed, "Argles" looked quite another person, with no traces of tears upon her face ; and, after the first shock of meeting her late patroness, with no sign of her accustomed nervousness. She could actually talk, Lady Forest remarked, like a reasonable being. And she looked so *well*, too—"quite a personage." The fact was, Mrs. Darlington had insisted upon her putting away her limp, untidy curls, and wearing neat caps, suitable to her years, Tessie and Edith having good-naturedly volunteered to provide her with a relay of pretty, simple head-dresses.



CHAPTER X V.

“ GOOD-BYE.”

“ Farewell, ye vales ! ye streams ! ye solemn hills ! ”

“ **W**HAT is this that I hear,” said Philip Warner in his most abrupt style of speech, when late that same evening he burst in upon Clare sitting meditatively, and all alone, over the schoolroom fire.

“ I really cannot tell what you may have heard,” replied Clare softly, as she stroked her white hands in the fitful red firelight. “ Is there anything of interest in the evening papers ? ” She looked exquisitely lovely as she sat there, in her simple black dress, with one pale rose—it might have been the legendary “ last rose of summer ”—fastened among the glossy coils of her abundant raven hair : and I think she was quite aware of the fact. And at that moment Philip thought he had never seen any woman half so fair.

“ I have not seen the evening papers,” he answered, almost angrily ; “ you know very well to what I refer ; my aunt tells me you are leaving the Mill House almost directly. Is it *true* ? ”

“ Why should you doubt it ? ” she asked, gently. “ Yes ; I am returning to London in a few days ; my visit to my cousins has already been prolonged beyond all reasonable limits. I am going to Lady Forest, as I dare say you know.”

“ Clare, you can never be such a very foolish young woman ! ” He was going to say “ such an idiot,” but thought better of it.

“ I see nothing very foolish in the arrangement. Lady Forest is my relative, and she offers me a home, which promises to be congenial. Through her I shall be able to re-enter society ; I was never born for country life ; I have not the making of a rustic in me.”

“ A fig for ‘ society,’ with all its jealousies and rivalries and heart-burnings. What can you possibly find in town

life as a set-off against our pure air, our beautiful shining river, and its pleasant banks? How will you tolerate ceaseless bustle, and noise, and hurry, after our unruffled calm and peace?”

“ I shall welcome it,” she returned warmly. “ I like bustle and noise, so that it be not actual uproar. Your unruffled calm is stagnation! and quiet is simple dulness. I am a child of the great world; I would rather live in the heart of the city than in the seclusion of the loveliest country scenes. I see no beauty in damp lanes and sodden wood-paths, long evenings by the domestic hearth, and the everlasting murmur of the stream. I have no taste for the home virtues, I am afraid; I am not formed, as my cousins are, to shine in the family circle. I want the press and stir of *life*, not life among trees and fields, but among men and women, who are of the world that I have always lived in. I am too old to mould myself afresh; I cannot constitute myself a *rustic*, and be content.”

“ You talk as if you were quite elderly,” he said sharply. “ It seems to me you are talking for the sake of talking. You have determined on your course, and so you seek to justify it.”

“ There is nothing to justify; I am accountable to myself alone. I am a free agent, Mr. Philip Warner.”

“ More’s the pity,” he responded, savagely; “ you want somebody to keep you in order; you would be all the better, all the *happier*, if you did but know it, with somebody to hold the reins a little tightly. Most women need the curb; *you* especially, I think.”

“ I am very much obliged to you for your gratuitous opinion, but I must decline the curb. I wonder you do not recommend a kicking-strap and bearing-reins.”

“ Nay, I think you may dispense with the latter appendage. And yet I don’t know; I can see your eyes shining in the firelight; your voice is eager, though soft; you clinch your little hand as if it meant to do something *presently*. You are like the hero of ‘Locksley Hall,’ who ‘heard his days before him, and the tumult of his life.’ You are longing, as he did; your spirit leaps within you, to be gone before you, ‘in among the throngs of men.’ You

look like a young race-horse, ready to be off and away, and chafing and fretting for the signal."

"You are not so very far wrong," she said, smiling serenely, and with the angry flush fading from her smooth, fair cheek. "I *am* ready and waiting for the change for which I have yearned. They have been very kind to me here. I have not a complaint against any one of them, except it be that they are too kind, too good; but my spirit does rise within me when I think of once more mingling with my fellows in the busy world. I long for the tumult and the strife! I like the rush of life! I breathe freely in London and Paris; *I live*. I only vegetate here, by the banks of the lovely Allan Water. I am yearning for the roar and tumult of the great city, for 'the lights of London,' miles and miles of gas lamps stretching far and far away in the dim perspective. I want to hear the rattle of the London pavement, under the horses' feet; I prefer the *rus in urbe* to any other '*rus*.'"

"And yet you have seemed sometimes to 'enjoy these solitudes—as you will call them—very much indeed?'"

"Yes, I have enjoyed the pleasures of the country; and at first I thought I might even get accustomed to the unbroken quiet of a place like this, where so much beauty abounds. And for a while, I think, I was content. If the summer had not faded,—perhaps;—but—no, I should have been desperate even then, with nothing but Nature to occupy my mind. As it is, I am like the swallows that are already on the wing;—they are flying south,—I must be off with them."

"So be it, then. It would be vain to attempt even to dissuade you, I perceive,"

"It would, indeed. But did you dream of dissuading me? What can it matter to you, whether I go or stay?"

"It cannot matter at all, certainly, seeing how very little sympathy you have with our life here. It is better for you to go than to stay. *But*—you will return."

"I hope so. I should be very much grieved if I thought I should not see any member of this household again. I shall always look back upon this peaceful summer as a quiet resting-place—a sort of green *oasis* in the desert of my life,

which has not been an especially brilliant one. Yes, I trust I shall return—some day.”

“ When you are tired of the wear and tear of the treadmill of fashionable life ; when you are satiated with gaiety and flattery, when you feel the hollowness of so-called ‘society,’ when you long for the rest and peace of Duston, even as now you pant for the glitter and turmoil of the world. And perhaps that time will come earlier than you anticipate.”

“ It may. . But *why* may it ? ”

“ Because you are foolishly throwing away gems for glittering trash ; you prefer gilt to gold. You are building your palace of pleasure on the quicksands ; I know something of your imperious Lady Forest—she is utterly unreliable. She is not a woman to be trusted.”

“ Not to be *trusted* ? Speak plainly, please.”

“ I only mean that she is a heartless woman of the world, and lives only for herself. She has taken a fancy to you now ; you will suit her purpose. When she has no further use for you, when she is tired of your society, and wants some new interest to fill her aimless life, you will be discarded like a favourite robe that has had its day, and is of no more account. You know the old vulgar simile of oranges squeezed and flung away ; you have heard of worn-out gloves, dropped on the road-side, and forgotten ? ”

“ You are particularly happy in your illustrations, Mr. Warner ; I cannot say you are a cheerful companion. Well, I must take my chance. Lady Forest may not be all my fancy paints her ; *but*, I think I can hold my own.”

“ I daresay you can ; you are not one of the meek and mild ones of the earth, you are of another spirit than poor craven-hearted Miss Argles. You will never sit down and weep because you are chidden. You are no patient Griselda.”

“ No, indeed ; I hate and despise ‘Griselda !’ I hope for the sake of womanhood that she is a mere creation of the poet’s fancy ; I hope there never was such a poor, mean-spirited, milk-and-water piece of flesh and blood as the legendary Griselda.”

“ Oh, you think her milk-and-watery ? ”

"To be sure I do. She can never have had *blood* in her veins, or she would have snapped her fingers at her wretched husband. I would have spoken out, and testified to my contempt of his brutal conduct. It would have gone hard with me if I had not made him utterly ashamed of himself."

"And yet it is said—it is conceded as a general truth, I believe—that only a noble nature *can* obey. A small-souled woman will contest every inch of the ground she occupies; she is essentially antagonistic; she is by nature and by practice, too, a wretched slave to her own love of ascendancy; she will fight for her own way, whether it be a question of life and death, or a mere matter of new window-curtains; and she will hold her own opinions, because they are her own, and *therefore* the best and soundest."

"A noble nature will instinctively obey a noble nature, and I hold that the man should be made of nobler stuff than the woman. One cannot voluntarily subject oneself to an inferior; one cannot humble oneself to a lower type of mind than one's own."

"Suppose you had sworn to love, honour, and *obey* your inferior; suppose you had linked yourself for life with a lower type of mind; what then?"

"I cannot suppose anything so improbable. Girls still in their teens—girls who marry out of the schoolroom—almost out of the nursery—may easily commit the too common blunder of marrying beneath them, and one may so marry, in spite of superior rank, and wealth, and *status*. Griselda, I hold, married beneath her; she was befooled, through her heart, or her eyes, or her ambition, and she paid the price of her folly. But a woman grown, who knows the world, who has had experience of human nature as it is, and not as it is painted; who has seen both sides of the shield, is not very likely to be so deluded. I shall never marry my inferior, Philip Warner. If I do not find my match, my *alter ego* in soul, and mind, and thought, I will die a maid; I am not afraid of the reproach of spinsterhood. There may be noble spinsters as well as noble matrons, though I grant you they may not so widely—as a rule, that is—demonstrate their nobility. I will not marry,

or dream of marriage, till my soul involuntarily sinks in obedience at the feet of the higher nature. Where I love I must reverence.”

“ Yet I know women—such women as you will find by the score, in the great world out yonder—love to see men at their feet.”

“ It is all very well to see mere *suitors* there, and courtship is the brief season of a woman’s triumph—it is in a man’s nature to undervalue what is absolutely his own ; but to see one’s husband, or even one’s betrothed, at one’s feet would be to me, I confess, too painful to witness. If—but I will say no more. Why discuss such a subject? We should never agree, though we carried on the debate for a year.”

“ And when are you going?”

“ Early next week. Lady Forest is only waiting till workmen are well out of her house in Lowndes-square ; extensive alterations have been made during her stay at Silverbeach.”

“ Well, I can only hope you will not be disappointed ; I trust you will be the happier for the change. For myself, I do not like London.”

“ Do you know it well?”

“ As well as most people do, I imagine ! That is, I know the whole West-end, and the City, and some of the fashionable suburbs. I do not pretend to be at all acquainted with some quarters of the great Babylon ; I know more, perhaps, of the bye-ways of Paris. I can find my way in the *Quartier Latin*, and I know the ins-and-outs of the ancient Lutetia.”

“ You have travelled a good deal for an Englishman.”

“ But I am not an Englishman, strictly speaking. I was born in Italy, at the little town of Orvieto. I left it, however, while still a child in arms, and I have only once revisited it. It is very lovely, the place of my birth, and singularly rich in historic associations ; the mountains rise round about it, as they are said to rise about Jerusalem.”

“ Do you speak Italian?”

“ Not very well ; I can make myself just understood, and that is all. I speak no language as well as English ; and I

prefer England to every other country in the world. I am English in all but nativity. My father was an Englishman."

"So I should infer from your name. And I was told that you were distantly connected with Cousin Margery."

"She is a cousin, I do not know how many times removed. But I call her 'Aunt.' She has been to me, and she is, the best and dearest of mothers. I shall always feel that I owe her the duty, as well as the affection, of a son."

"You do not remember your own mother?"

"Scarcely; though I have a sort of dim recollection of a melancholy lady with large dark eyes, and long black hair, fastened with golden pins. But she may have been my Aunt Gemma, with whom I became acquainted years afterwards in her wild home among the Apennines."

"Which died first—your mother or your father?"

"My mother, I suppose, but I really do not know. I do not remember that my father ever named her to me, or to any one else in my presence; it was an unsatisfactory marriage, I believe. I am afraid there was not much sympathy of any kind between my parents. She was a passionate Italian and a bigoted Roman Catholic; he an Englishman bred in the United States, and, as I have been informed, an ultra-Protestant. It is difficult to imagine what fancied affinity ever drew them together. Is that the supper-bell?"

"I think it must be. I came here an hour ago, because I wanted to think over something uninterruptedly. Instead of giving myself to steady reflection, I have been seduced into talking a great deal of nonsense."

"I hope I have not quite broken the thread of thought; but I beg your pardon if, as I fear, I disturbed your meditations. However, I have learned something of your inner self through our idle converse."

"What have you learned?"

"I have gathered that you do not absolutely dislike women of the Griselda type. You will obey when *your time comes*, but only your superior. Have a care, though, that you are not mistaken; there is an old adage, you know, about going through and through the wood, and picking up

a crooked stick at last ; I am not sure that you are an expert. It seems to me that you are not at all unlikely to pass by the pure gold, if it be at all tarnished, and pick up aluminium. Coloured glass is sometimes preferred to an uncut ruby or a diamond. There is Tessie calling for you."

Clare brooded long that night over this curious and somewhat inconsequential discourse. She was getting accustomed to Philip's brusque manner, to his lack of ceremony, to his utter want of deference for her expressed opinions. Strangely enough, she had formed a habit of discussing with him all manner of subjects ; and, in conversing with him, she generally expounded herself more freely than was her wont. She spoke almost rudely to him sometimes, she feared ; and yet he certainly cared more to talk with her than with either Edith or Theresa. Her cousins, perhaps, might be a little shocked at the frankness of her speech on certain occasions ; Philip had a way of piquing her into candid avowals and antagonistic rejoinders ; they seldom discoursed without firing off plenty of small shot at each other, and there was always a sort of guerilla skirmishing whenever they encountered.

And yet she was quite sure that Philip sincerely lamented her departure. If she had shown one sign of relenting, he might possibly have told her so ; it would not give her much trouble, she thought, to bring him *now* to a confession of his weakness, to prove how far he was from being as invulnerable as he had once professed himself to be. A very little more, and she might have had her revenge. But the game was certainly not worth the candle ; and it would never do to postpone—perhaps even *forego*—the pleasurable prospects awaiting her in Lowndes Square, for the sake of seeing Philip Warner at her feet. She must leave her victory half won, her conquest incomplete.

The days passed heavily enough, for she had but few preparations to make. After that evening, Philip was seldom at home ; Ralph and Dick openly bemoaned the coming separation ; Edie and Tessie said little, but that little was far from inspiring. Miss Argles had evidently revealed to them some of the ugly secrets of her late prison-house. She could not comprehend how any one, not

compelled to seek a shelter, could voluntarily subject herself to the tyranny of Sir Raymond Forest's haughty relict.

On the eve of her journey, Miss Argles presented her with a keepsake, in the guise of a porcupine-shaped pin-cushion of crimson velvet, saying, as she laid it in Clare's still open trunk, "It's no great thing, my dear, but it's useful. A pin is worth four times its intrinsic value when you are just desperate for one, and can't lay your hand upon it; and I would advise you to have it always by you, for nothing puts my lady out so much as keeping her waiting for one instant. Ah, you little know what you have to encounter. It is so depressing to be always scolded; I have felt quite another creature since I came here and left off crying. I shall often think of you, Miss Clare, dear. Yours was the first kind voice I had heard for many a day. And that glass of water you brought me! Don't you know that a glass of cold water given in Christ's name will have its reward?"

"Oh, but it was *not* given in Christ's name! I thought nothing about Him; I scarcely ever do."

"Oh, don't you? I have learned to think so much about Him since I came here. I could not go now and live with irreligious people, who do not care to serve *Him*, and who consequently do not love Him. Somehow, the life in this house is all religion, and they seem to do everything to the glory of God; and nobody is cross, or gloomy, or even out of spirits. I am a poor stupid creature, but I can understand some things I never understood before. *Now I know what it means by the love of Christ constraining us.*"

Something like melancholy stole over Clare as she gazed, on the morning of her departure, over the pleasant valley that lay smiling before her in the sober autumnal sunshine. It was changed since she had seen it first in its bright summer loveliness—the trees waving their green boughs, the river sparkling, the flowers blooming, and the purple hills rising from the sea of golden mist. Now, the sere leaves were drifting idly over the damp lawn and mossy garden walks, the river seemed to flow solemnly between its flowerless banks, the distant hills were dark, and looked

sad and desolate under the grey wintry sky. For one moment Clare felt as though she were leaving all peace and happiness behind her.

"Remember, my dear," said Mrs. Darlington, as she bade Clare farewell, "remember that you have always a *home* here. If you are not comfortable in London, or wherever Lady Forest may pitch her tent, come back to us; your room will be always ready for you. And somehow, my dear, I think you will come back to us sooner or later, and we shall all be very glad to have you again. Good-bye, dear child, and God's blessing be upon you wherever you go. We shall all pray for you, and very, very often we shall talk about you. Once more, good-bye."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WORLD'S ATTRACTIONS.

"Hers was the subtlest spell by far
Of all that sets young hearts romancing;
She was our queen, our rose, our star."

AND now Clare was surely happy once more. Lady Forest received her most affectionately, and bade her welcome with effusion. Silverbell Cottage was already dismantled, and Tarleton was just finishing her packing. The next morning was to see them setting off for London; they could travel from Weathersfield to King's-cross, with only a single change of carriage.

"I am quite tired of Silverbeach," said her ladyship to Clare, as they sat drinking their hot negus over the fire before going to bed; "it is all very well in fine weather, but the sea is enough to give one the horrors under a gloomy sky. The shore is a desolation; the high tides cover all the rocks; if you go out on the downs, you cannot make headway against the furious blast. I have read all the books at the library, and I am tired of writing. I dare say you

are tired, too, of the monotony of the Mill ; we will take a nice little holiday, my dear ; we will eschew every kind of task for a few months, and simply enjoy ourselves. It will be delightful to be in London once more."

"It will, indeed. I never could tolerate the country, except for a summer change. There is no place like London, except it be Paris ; and I have a great desire to see Vienna ; I am told that society there is exceptionally good and brilliant."

"And you have been told the truth, for I was there several years ago, and enjoyed myself immensely. We will spend a month at Vienna as soon as convenient ; I shall want an interval of complete relaxation when I have finished my novel."

"And how does the novel progress ?"

"Not quite so satisfactorily as I could wish. I do not get on happily with the second volume, the story somehow hangs fire ; I change my mind twenty times a day about the ultimate fate of the heroine. I cannot please myself ; my pen lacks something—I can scarcely tell what. I hope my powers are not failing me."

"Most probably you are overwrought ; a few months, or even weeks, of thorough rest will restore you, mentally as well as physically. You will feel better, too, away from that 'ever-sounding sea,' as some poetic person calls it ; the ceaseless thunder of the waves day and night, mingled with the roar of the wind, is enough to make one melancholy mad ! Give me the roar of Piccadilly."

"I am so pleased to find that our tastes are entirely sympathetic. A short seclusion is delightful, especially when you are quite used-up, and *want* to rusticate ; but only town-life can really satisfy one's social and intellectual nature. Nature itself is so monotonous. One of Argles' petty offences was that she was always praising the variety—the *charming* variety—of Silverbeach ! The sea, she declared, was continually changing !"

"And so it does change, of course ; winds, tides, clouds—all combine to alter its countenance ; but still it is *the sea* ; and one tires of looking at it, day after day. In spite of all the poetry that is written about it, one soon wearies of it."

"I am very glad to find we think so exactly alike. That ridiculous Argles was always quoting some line she had once stumbled on, when she was quite a girl :—'God made the country, and man made the town.' She said it with such a complacent smirk, and such an air, that I could have beaten her ; I believe she thought secretly it was somewhere in the Bible, though she could never find it. At last I strictly forbade her ever again to repeat the nonsense, under pain of instant dismissal ; and you know how very much she dreaded *that*. If she had even hinted to me that she was purposing a visit to Duston, I should have taken all possible care to circumvent her. What in the world took her there ? On what pretence could she make her appearance at the Mill House ?"

"She wanted to see *me*, she said. She wanted to bid me 'good-bye' for the last time, for she took it into her head that I had been very kind to her. And I am quite sure that that was her sole intent ; a more truthful person than poor old Argles does not live. Well, she looked so jaded and travel-worn, and altogether miserable, that Cousin Margery took pity on her, and made her stay all night. It was not very difficult afterwards to constrain her to prolong her visit ; the cousins always found something for her to do, and to this hour she is quite convinced that she is making herself *useful*. I do not think she would remain at the Mill if she thought otherwise."

"And is she going to stop where she is ?"

"Just for the present she is, I believe. She seemed so like an irresponsible child that Cousin Margery could not find it in her heart to send her away. And she really achieves far more than you would give her credit for. There is a great deal to do, one way and another, at the Mill ; and there is the farm, too, all, to a great extent, under one management ; and Miss Argles, now that she wears proper spectacles, and has quite left off crying, really *sews* very neatly. Then she has developed an actual genius for cooking ; and my last vision of her this morning was in the kitchen, concocting a dainty pudding for one of Edie's sick pensioners. After that, she told me triumphantly, she was going to mend the back-stair carpets !"

"Very well ; I am sure I congratulate her on her luck, poor old simpleton. She is in her sphere, and you are in yours. These Darlings of the Mill are eminently respectable, no doubt ; but they are not precisely the sort of people to give a home to Richard Darlington's daughter."

"They have been very, *very* kind to me. I should have been homeless but for them."

"Most estimable folks, I am sure ; but, still, *not* the folk for you. Let us go to bed ; we must be astir tolerably early to-morrow morning."

"We have nothing to do, I suppose, but take our breakfasts and be off?"

"Nothing else. Tarleton will see that all is ready. She is an invaluable servant ; never forgets, and very seldom commits a blunder. Weller, too, is quite a treasure ; I invariably leave everything to him. I did think of leaving him behind to settle with the agent ; but when I came to reflect, that was out of the question. I could not travel without Weller in attendance. Tarleton objects to going second-class unaccompanied, and she will never undertake the tickets and the luggage single-handed. I shall leave the housemaid—who is really a most capable young woman—to go over the inventory, place the key in the agent's hands, and follow in less than a week's time."

The next day the journey between Silverbeach and London was successfully accomplished. Tarleton and Weller—"the incomparable Weller!"—acquitted themselves faultlessly. The heavy luggage had gone before with Lady Forest's own carriage and horses. A hired post-chaise conveyed them to Weathersfield, where they arrived only a few minutes before the starting of their train. Their tickets were ready, their *impedimenta*, duly labelled, in readiness for the van, and they had only to deposit themselves in the most luxurious first-class compartment that the obsequious station-master could select.

The evening shades were falling when they drove through the London streets once more. Lady Forest seemed calmly, quietly content, thankful to have returned again to civilisation. Clare was so wildly elate that she could scarcely repress her jubilant spirits. There was the familiar Euston

Road—muddy enough, and rather misty, doubtless, but bright with gas-light, and resonant with the noise of traffic and the bustle of ordinary business. There were the dummy *cows* turning round and round, as Clare had seen them, at rare intervals, ever since she could remember. There was St. Pancras Church, with its minarets and caryatides, all the blacker, both of them, for the London smoke that had remorselessly besooted them since last she passed through Euston Square ; there was the stonemason's-yard, with its wondrous sculpture and mortuary stock-in-trade. Last of all, there was Oxford Street, then the Park and Rotten Row, and, finally, Lowndes Square. Clare felt that she was once more at *home*. Her weary term of exile, her compulsory rustication, was over. It was delightful to hear—not the rush of the stream, but the clatter of cabs and omnibuses in Knightsbridge and Piccadilly ; to awake in the morning and see pedestrians and equestrians past counting, as well as equipages, here, there, and everywhere.

The first morning was brilliant enough, but very soon clouds arose, and the horizon darkened. By twelve o'clock it was raining steadily, and by the time luncheon was over it had settled into a regular downpour, and all hope of a drive, and an hour's shopping in Regent Street, had to be abandoned. Still, there was unpacking and re-arranging, and the turning over of visiting-cards, with a view to the complete remodelling of Lady Forest's visiting-list. Then there were the evening papers and sundry Reviews to be turned over, and their contents discussed ; and, later on, there was a heap of fresh music, just sent in on approbation, to be inspected. Altogether, the day was got through somehow ; but Clare was astonished to find how very tired she was, and how ready for bed, when Weller brought in the silver salver, with the decanters and the hot water, which always made its appearance as the closing ceremonial of the day. She could with difficulty repress her yawns, while Lady Forest sat idly stirring the contents of her tumbler, and wondering who would call first, as soon as it was known that she had arrived in town.

"It is almost as dull as Silverbeach, I must confess," said her ladyship, listening to the drip, drip of the rain outside.

"But, still, wet weather is more endurable in London than elsewhere ; there is always something to dissipate one's *ennui*, and to-morrow we will pay *Madame Marie* a visit, come what may. All my dresses are shabby and *outré* ; there is nothing like sea-air for ruining your *toilettes* ; and you, Tarleton tells me, have actually *nothing* to wear. And that reminds me—you will go quite out of mourning, of course ?"

"I had rather not wear colours just yet, please ; one always stays in mourning two years *for a parent*."

"Not now, my dear ; it is happily the fashion no longer to walk about like mourning-coaches. Have your mourning as deep as you choose at first. You can scarcely wear too much crape *at first* ; but after six months, 'mitigated mourning' is the rule—except, indeed, in the case of a widow, who would outrage society if she made alterations within the year. I hate mourning myself, but I did my duty by society—*punctilio*usly. My first dresses were of paramatta—the very finest material, of course ; and the skirts were crape to within one inch of the bodice, which was also entirely covered with crape—just relieved by deep lawn collar and cuffs ; and I made no change till a year and a day had elapsed after the funeral. Through the winter, which was severe, I wore neither velvet nor fur ;—widows are not supposed to be seen much abroad till the regulation twelvemonths have elapsed. Then I wore thick lustreless silks—poplins, chiefly—well covered with crape ; and at the end of eighteen months rich silks, with less crape, and jet trimmings and ornaments. Of course, I neither accepted invitations nor went out to places of amusement for the whole first year. I contented myself with quiet little card-parties and *petits soupers* at home, inviting none but my most intimate friends and acquaintances."

"But I am not a widow, and——"

"And, of course, it is permissible for you to return to society as quickly as you choose. When did your good father depart this life ?"

"He died last June twelvemonths—on the very first day of June—not a year and a-half as yet, you perceive."

"A year and a-half, and you no heiress ! Why, if your

father had left you five thousand a year, you could not mourn longer. Crape is not the thing after *six* months ; and at the end of *nine* months *demi-deuil* is quite correct. A whole year having elapsed, it is your *duty* to return to society, and discard all sign of mourning. Indeed, Clare, I must request you, as a favour to myself, to wear no more black ; the sight of it depresses my spirits and injures my health. Any degree of mourning suggests melancholy thoughts ; we *must* die some day, of course ; but why sadden ourselves in anticipation ? It is time enough to think of *death* when the doctors put on long faces, and tell us there is no further hope."

"And yet you defend wearing black?"

"In reason, I do. I even *insist* on it, strictly in accordance with the rules of good society. Not to conform to these rules is worse than tasteless ; it shows a wicked, Radical spirit, such as characterised the period anterior to the Great Revolution. I once read that it was one of the marked signs of the times, prior to that awful upheaving of all things, that the French aristocracy displayed their heartlessness by first curtailing the orthodox period of mourning, and then discarding it altogether. There is a fitness and medium in all things ; and we of the upper classes, my dear Clare—*nous autres*—ought never to forget our duty in setting a proper example. So you and I will go to-morrow to *Madame Marie*, and duly replenish our wardrobes. You may wear grey satin, if you like, with pink-coral ornaments—nothing can be prettier ; gloves of pale pink-coral hue, and fan of the same delicate tint of marabout feathers, with silk girdle to match. That, really, is a sort of compromise for mourning, you know."

"Is it?"

"Yes, of course it is. Pray do not yawn so violently. It is as bad form to yawn in that way as never to go to church."

"Then I must be off to bed, for I cannot stifle this stupid yawning. I don't know what makes me so very tired to-night."

"It is the weather partly, and the change from the quiet of the country. I am weary myself ; *there*, you have set me

on yawning. Nothing is more contagious than gaping, I believe ; it is dangerous even to think of it. But I will not lecture you to-night ; we will take care to amuse ourselves to-morrow. Dear me, I am afraid I am growing excessively stupid ; we might have played at cards, or gone to the theatre. Just look at the *Standard* to-morrow morning, and remind me to send Weller early to the box-office of the theatre that promises the best entertainment. There is not much going on just now, I am afraid."

The next morning Clare felt considerably refreshed, and acknowledged to herself that it really was time she studied her dress a little more. The nine months at the Stewarts' had certainly not improved her taste, and she had almost neglected her appearance at the Abbey Mill. Yes ; silver greys and pale coral would suit her style very well, and she had lately seen a *toilette* of rich black satin, draped with Spanish lace, and a head-dress of pomegranate-buds and flowers twisted into a golden net. That would not be far removed from *demi-deuil* ; she was sure the effect would be admirable.

And they chatted gaily over their breakfast, the elder and the younger lady ; and the elder was delighted to discuss the question of feathers and flowers and jewellery, and was eager to promise Clare her choice of the prettiest and most *recherché* of all the costumes at present obtainable. "But there really is not much worthy of our attention in town just now," my lady concluded ; "people generally—our own set, you know—are in the country, and it is a very dead time in London at present ; only a few of the very first *artistes* will have anything at all worth showing, still less worth purchasing. We will select a few things here, and then run over to Paris for a fortnight or so, and see what *Worth* can do for us. And I must think where we are to spend Christmas—not in London, certainly. I shall write to Lady Rosamund, and throw out a gentle hint ; she might as well ask us to Chilling Towers for a week or two—there is generally a very brilliant party down there for Christmas and the New Year."

"And who is Lady Rosamund, and where is Chilling?"

"Chilling is in Chalkshire, quite on the coast. Lady Rosamund is one of the three beautiful and greatly admired

daughters of the Earl of Branksome ; and the wife of Francis—present head of the Darlington family. Of course he is lord of the manor, and M.P., and J.P., and all that sort of thing ; and their place—almost equal to a baronial castle, only it is quite modern—is called Chilling Towers. It is a most desirable house for a young lady about to make her *début*; one meets the very first people there. And with such advantages as you, my dear, enjoy—a *Darlington!* with a face and figure that must command admiration even from the envious—I shall expect you to become quite the rage. It will be an excellent preparation for the season, when, of course, I shall take care that you are ‘*introduced*’ with all proper ceremony.”

The morning was not altogether unfavourable to the proposed expedition, and Madame Marie received her patronesses with mingled effusion and deference. Lady Forest displayed so much acquaintance with the dressmaker’s lore; she understood so well the eccentric vagaries of fashion; she seemed so thoroughly *au fait* in all that concerned “*toilettes*” and “*modes*,” that Clare could not help thinking it was a pity she had not gone into business as a “Court Milliner.” She was certainly “to the manner born,” and she would probably have acquired a first-class reputation as *modiste*, had she only graduated in the “work-room,” instead of in certain school-rooms at Kensington and at Passy.

But the result of that morning’s shopping was highly satisfactory to Miss Clare Darlington. She became the happy possessor of no less than three most ravishing *toilettes*. Madame said they were *charmantes à merveille! à ravir!* Mademoiselle graced the costumes and set them off to the best advantage—it was a rare privilege to dress so beautiful a young lady ;—a positive enjoyment to try costumes on *such* a figure. Mademoiselle ought to be a Princess of the Blood. She was certainly a *Queen* ;—the Queen of grace and beauty. And she continued her flattery till Clare, who, as I said before, had as little *vanity* in her composition as was natural to a girl who had been admired from the nursery, grew quite disgusted, and replied only in monosyllables, or not at all.

Still, both ladies returned home well satisfied with the

ministrations of this high-priestess of Fashion. Lady Forest herself gave orders for a purple-velvet dress, with satin-lined train, to be worn with some of her matchless *point Guipure*, real Venetian lace, that had been in the Darlington family from time immemorial. She bought also several dozens of kid gloves, some dainty, embroidered stockings, and several pairs of exquisitely fitting satin *bottines*; most of them on Clare's account.

Then, on their return to Lowndes Square, Weller greeted them with the welcome intelligence that one of the best boxes of the Haymarket was at their disposal for that evening. It had been bespoken by a family of distinction, who had quite recently suffered bereavement, and they were only grateful that it should be taken off their hands.

So that evening passed away quickly enough, and Lady Forest was delighted to meet several old friends, who were eager to welcome her back from the country. Her box was pretty well filled with loungers between the acts; and Clare was such an evident success, that she could but congratulate herself on the wisdom of her own good policy in securing so charming a personage as her companion. And she had the great satisfaction of observing that in more than one case "a profound impression was created." It was a long time since Lady Forest had received such a little court in her box; it reminded her of the triumphs of her own youth.

Clare felt no inclination to *yawn* that evening. Lady Forest invited several of her friends to return and sup with her at Lowndes Square, and a gay little party assembled in her dining room just when the good folk at the Abbey Mill were probably composing themselves to their peaceful slumbers. Clare was so brilliant as to delight her patroness, and to win the most flattering opinions from the gentlemen who were fortunate enough to be included among the guests. It was past two o'clock when the impromptu entertainment ended, and the ladies retired to their rooms. From that night Clare had no more complaints to make of dulness or monotony. The MS. sheets of *the novel* were shut up in my lady's davenport, and her secretary's duties were postponed *sine die*.

There were still so many of Lady Forest's "set" in town, that there was no lack of festivities, and hospitalities could be freely exchanged. There were dinner parties, dancing *soirées*, afternoon teas, literary *réunions*, and even one grand ball, to say nothing of operas, plays, drives, shopping, concerts, and morning calls. Once more Clare was restored, and *more* than restored, to the old life that had seemed to have passed away for ever; and for awhile she was supremely happy. She believed that she was *satisfied!*

CHAPTER XVII.

TRANSFORMATIONS.

"A change came o'er the spirit of my dream."

"**I**T is Clare; I am quite sure it is Clare Darlington!"

"Nonsense, ma; it isn't a bit like her—it's too tall, and the hair is not dark enough. Besides, she's two hundred miles away, buried in the country."

"Very well, Sarah Anne, I am always wrong, of course, but I suppose it's the fashion to contradict one's mother, nowadays; when I was young, things were different. If that isn't Clare Darlington, though, I ain't a honest woman."

"Pray do not speak so loudly, ma; you should not make such—such *asseverations* in public; people will overhear you."

"It don't much matter if they do, for I haven't set eyes on a familiar face yet. There's nobody here that *we* know; it's quite an affair of the *upper ten*. I am told all the lady-patronesses have handles to their names."

"Then it's not very likely that Clare is here, unless she has had the luck to marry a nobleman."

"And that very likely she has; she's handsome enough, I must confess; I dare say she has married a lord."

"*A nobleman*, mamma! Only the uneducated masses talk

about ‘a lord.’ Pray do be careful,—a little slip like that may betray one’s origin so easily.”

The speakers, as you will have conjectured, were Mrs. Stewart, of 27, Kilmarnock Gardens, and her second daughter, Sarah Anne; and they were “assisting” at a grand fancy fair, held in aid of a church building fund, which had in contemplation something very grand indeed. In plain English, a church was needed in one of the most overgrown of the west-end districts, and, subscriptions coming in but very slowly, it had been proposed to hold a grand bazaar for four days in the spacious rooms known as the Alexandra Hall. The novelty of reproducing a mediæval market, or an old English fair, had not then come into fashion, or was known only in very select circles, and limited to private patronage; but this bazaar was a most *aristocratic* one; a most unexampled one for splendour, rank, and brilliant display; and a great number of august personages had volunteered their services for the opening day. The bazaar opened most brilliantly. There had been some demur as to the expediency of this “five-shilling day,” which it was feared might keep so many people away; but results very soon proved that, for once, the very select and patrician committee were more than justified in all their arrangements. From the moment the doors were opened till the very last thing at night the hall was crowded, and the day’s receipts were said to be “something unprecedented.”

Of course the Stewarts had elected to be present on this very important occasion; if the admission-fee had been a guinea instead of a crown they would have been all the better pleased; it gave them infinite satisfaction to be numbered with the *élite*—to rub shoulders with actual live members of the aristocracy—with those most enviable of mortals, who had the happy privilege to have their names included in the printed *Peerage List*. Only as Mary Jane Stewart said, it was not nice to have your exact age proclaimed to all the world; it was all very well so long as one could rejoice in the first freshness and brilliancy of youth; but *la première jeunesse* once past, no one cared to be perpetually reminded of the fact; no one, after a certain epoch,

liked to be reminded *annually* of the exact date of one's birth. Such a very little arithmetic sufficed to inform the world of what might otherwise have remained, more or less, a secret.

She had got over her "disappointment" by this time, but she had by no means forgiven the cousin who had been the cause of her sad experience ; she, and Sarah Anne too, had given themselves up to something like unrestrained exultation on the day of Clare's departure, and they had congratulated themselves and each other and their doting parent on being delivered from their hated and dreaded rival, whom they could not, or would not, believe innocent of malice and design. Mr. Stewart, when he came home after his brief absence, was surprised, and yet relieved, to find that the inevitable exodus had really taken place, and that the peace of the family was, as he fondly hoped, restored.

And yet his conscience would not let him be quite at ease ; he felt that he had acted an unkindly and cowardly part ; for though Mary Jane senior always would have her own way, and worried him almost out of his life till she had gained it, still he *was* the head of the house and truly responsible for the transactions of his family. And though he was very glad to have been spared the parting with his niece, who would probably have reproached him, though only mutely, with her large dark melancholy eyes, he could not for some time escape from certain uneasy qualms whenever anything happened to bring up the mention of her name, or to revive her memory in their midst, and with it that of the sweet sister whom he had once loved so dearly ; and Clare was poor Fanny's child ; and what would Fanny say to him, if, when he met her, as he hoped to do hereafter, she should require from him any account of his dealings with her unprotected orphan ?

As we have seen, he wrote to Mr. Darlington of the Mill, and having certified himself of the girl's safety and comfort, tried to dismiss from his mind all the misgivings which had haunted him of late, and pretty well succeeded in laying the flattering unction to his soul that things had shaped themselves exactly as could be wished, seeing that Clare and her aunt and cousins never could live under the same roof in

peace and quietness. "Had she plenty of money in her pocket when she went off?" he had inquired of his wife when they were discussing, as she fervently hoped for the last time, the vexed question of Clare Darlington's claims upon them. And she had replied, "Oh, as to *plenty*, I could not say; that depends upon what you would call 'plenty.' She had quite enough for all her needs, I am certain, for she had received her quarter's income just before she left, and she had next to no expenses while she was with us. I should think she must have saved something handsome."

And with this Mr. Stewart was constrained to be content. He had no idea that his wife could be guilty of even the most indirect falsehood; that the girls told "white lies" by the bushel he was obliged to confess, but that Mary Jane, the partner of his joys and sorrows, could condescend to duplicity of any kind, he neither could nor would allow.

It was now the end of November, and Clare had almost passed out of mind in the Stewart household, when the grand bazaar, for which they had all worked most industriously, came to pass. There was a certain Mrs. Thornton living in their vicinity, and also attending St. Wilfrid's Church, who was supposed to be "extremely well connected;" she was a widow, not too well-dowered, considering her claims as an accredited member of the aristocracy; and she who had rather given the cold shoulder to the Misses Stewart, who had done their best to introduce themselves to her notice,—suddenly made advances, and in the most winning manner besought them to help her in the great and pious undertaking to which she had pledged herself.

Nothing loth, the Misses Stewart gracefully responded; they had wanted for a long time to be on visiting terms with the dignified widow, and here at last was the very opportunity for which they had waited. Of course, they would be charmed to assist in so blessed and excellent a work; and forthwith they undertook to ply their needles and to beg for contributions on all hands. Mrs. Thornton herself would not have a stall, but she would assist her cousin, the Honourable Mrs. Lullingworth, and it would be so kind of the Misses Stewart if they would consent to make themselves generally useful. They fondly hoped to be asked to

assist on the two or three busy days prior to the opening of the bazaar ; they would get so much more intimate with the aristocratic stall-holders and their friends over real hard work than afterwards, when the actual crush and bustle commenced ; and they earnestly assured Mrs. Thornton that their capacities for labour were unbounded, that nothing would please them better than to be handling hammer and tacks, and manipulating muslin and glazed calico, from morning to night.

But Mrs. Thornton made no promises ; she only accepted gracefully all the contributions that arrived at her villa residence, and she was "not at home," when the young ladies, uneasy at receiving no special invitation, called to ask if they might not run down there and then to the hall, and make themselves really useful. They were bitterly disappointed at not playing their part in the preparations, which were now in full swing. Nevertheless they resolved not to be abashed : they would present themselves on the opening-day, pay their five shillings, and, ticket in hand, join the fashionable throng.

They made their way through the crowd, straight to Mrs. Lullingworth's stall, but Mrs. Thornton was not there, and they could not introduce themselves. The Honourable Mrs. Lullingworth was assisted by two beautiful and elegantly dressed young ladies, who seemed to be driving a prosperous trade in the costly wares upon their counter. Mary Jane shrank back in dismay, and Sarah Anne's brow was suddenly beclouded, for they both felt that they would contrast most unfavourably with these fair and sparkling shopkeepers, whom they at one moment had had the audacity to believe they might supersede.

Their own productions were there certainly, but these were by no means accorded the best positions, and, indeed, they were fain to confess that there were many other things far surpassing theirs, in actual value, as well as in mere effectiveness. The longer they looked the more dissatisfied they felt. Fast and furious grew the fun ; there was plenty of flirtation, but in none of it were the Misses Stewart included. They were indeed politely requested to purchase —and purchase they did, spending their money without stint, but still without gaining anything like the equivalent

for which they had bargained. "Everybody seems to know everybody," said Mary Jane, "except ourselves. *We* seem to be outside the magic circle, and the invisible barriers won't break down. There isn't a creature we know in the room, and we seem somehow to miss the spirit and life of everything."

They had been about two hours in the hall when Mrs. Stewart, pushing her way vigorously to the corner where her distressed daughter, hot and wearied, sat fanning herself, by the side of her equally hot and wearied sister, announced in audible tones that she had just "spotted" Clare Darlington, most beautifully dressed, presiding over one of the best stalls in the place, and surrounded by gentlemen, who were all paying her compliments, and eager to buy "button-holes" from her at any price. And she had concluded by pointing her out, as she stood, proffering her rosebuds to a tall, handsome individual, whom Mrs. Stewart had just been informed was the Duke of Chessington. Sarah Anne, cross and vexed, and perhaps a little bilious, had somewhat brusquely informed her "ma" that she was quite mistaken. Clare Darlington was not present; nor was it possible, all circumstances taken into account, that she should be present. Still Mrs. Stewart, who had been round the room "on her own hook," was quite certain that she had seen, with her own eyes, the face and form of her discarded "*niece-in-law*," as she had sometimes named her.

"Just look between those chrysanthemums, 'girls,'" she cried at last. "There she is, as large as life, in the loveliest *costume* I ever saw, and with a bundle of rosebuds in her hand. And she's got the most exquisite flowers at her neck; and they're fastened in the lace-ruffle with a brooch that sparkles just for all the world like *real* rubies; though, if it *is* Clare—and I'll eat her if it isn't—it can't be anything better than coloured glass."

"I don't know," said Mary Jane, pettishly, "Clare had some jewels of her very own, though I don't remember any *rubies* among them. But she had some *pink topazes*, I know, and I mean to have some like them before I am many weeks older."

At this precise moment, up floundered Miss Caroline,

dragging with her Bella, who had not "gone to boarding-school" with the twins, and evidently in a state of supreme excitement, for she, too, had "spotted" her pariah cousin, and not only seen her with her eyes, but heard her with her ears; there was no mistake about it. Yes, Clare Darlington was there, presiding, or rather jointly presiding, over a stall, which seemed to be the centre of attraction ; and she was talking to all the *nobs* as familiarly as if she was really one of them, "And I must say," concluded Carrie, "that she looks *bee-yutiful*, and is in the best spirits ; at first I thought she must be governess in some tip-top family, doing duty for her mistress for the nonce, but no governess ever was dressed as she is, or would ever be brazen enough to *flirt* with *noble-men*."

"Oh, she's brazen enough for anything !" put in Mary Jane, fanning herself with all her might.

"Did you have a good look at her ?" asked Sarah Anne.

"I went and stood right opposite to her, and *stared* at her with all my eyes," replied Caroline.

"Why *didn't* you go and buy something at her stall ?" demanded Mrs. Stewart, regretfully.

"I couldn't get near it, it was that crowded," answered Carrie ; "she's regularly holding a court. But I am pretty sure she saw me, for our eyes met, just for one instant ; of course, she didn't take any notice."

"What is the name up over her stall ?" was the next inquiry. "The names are up, ever so beautifully illuminated, over *all* the stalls. I'll swear there was no Miss Darlington —anywhere."

"Really, mamma," remonstrated Mrs. Stewart's three eldest daughters, in chorus ; they were terribly afraid of her being overheard, and she was in the most impracticable mood, just then, sturdily refusing to be *suppressed*, according to custom.

Bella put in her little oar. Spoiled by her fond parents as "the baby," and snubbed by her elder sisters, she was at times a most irrepressible young person, coming perpetually to the front, although continually reminded that "little girls should be seen and not heard." And now she chirped out in the shrill accents which distinguished most of her family,

"I looked, ma! I saw the name, and it was Lady Forest!"

"Then she is married!" exclaimed Mrs. Stewart, emphatically; "she is married to *Lord Forest*, whoever he may be. She's got ahead of you, girls, as I always said she would. She's a married lady, and here are you—all three—not even engaged."

"We are not sure that she is married," pouted Sarah Anne. "I'll bet a sovereign she *is not*."

"Don't be vulgar," interposed Mary Jane. "I've little doubt in my own mind that she has taken service of some sort with this Lady Forest, and that she is simply acting under orders. I've heard of lady-patronesses sending their maids to the front in order to save themselves trouble. They give their name and their subscriptions, some of these scornful swells, and think they have behaved quite handsomely."

"You wouldn't fancy she was a *maid* if you saw her, would she, Carrie?" returned Mrs. Stewart; "neither maids nor governesses wear such exquisite dresses; if I hadn't recognised her, I am sure I should have taken her for one of the Royal Princesses, that people *did* say were to be here this morning. But let us go and see, girls; if we stop here much longer the crowd will hem us in. Push away! that's the only style in such a crush as this."

A few minutes' struggle, during which Carrie distinguished herself by trampling on people's trains, and elbowing most successfully those who obstructed her progress, brought the party at last to a standstill precisely opposite the "Court of Queen Flora," where Miss Darlington and two other ladies were selling bouquets and button-holes as fast as it was possible to exchange little bits of gay blossom and scraps of fern for sterling coin of the realm.

Mrs. Stewart sat and stared; the three young ladies—not including Miss Bella, who had rushed off with several stranger-girls of about her own age to try her fortune in a bran pie—stared also. It certainly *was* Clare, more radiant and queen-like than she had ever appeared in Kilmarnock Gardens. Clare, in robes of gossamer and silk, her hair woven into a coronet with the choicest flowers, intermingled

with glittering gems, which, as Mrs. Stewart again averred, "might delude even an expert, they were so very much like real rubies."

Clare's two companions were also splendidly attired. One was an elderly, matronly lady, in rich, garnet-coloured satin, and lace that a duchess might have envied; the other was not exactly pretty, but patrician-looking, *piquante*, stylish, and *petite*; a mere girl, and yet evidently no novice in the world of fashion.

"Can you tell me who those ladies are?" inquired Mrs. Stewart presently of a portly dame, who took a seat beside her.

"The elder is Lady Forest," was the reply; "the beautiful tall girl, just putting some camellias together, is her niece, or cousin, I am not certain which—a Miss Darlington—whom she is bringing out, I am told. The other, the brunette, in pink and pearls, is Lady Evelina Teviot, a daughter of the Earl of Branksome. All three ladies are related, I know."

"It's impossible!" Mrs. Stewart was beginning; but the dowager to whom she had appealed was fortunately turning in another direction, and her daughters instantly suppressed her, almost by force.

"For gracious sake don't betray yourself," whispered Mary Jane; while Caroline, treading heavily on the maternal toes, put her parent into such agony, that, for the moment, she could think and speak only of her *corns*.

"I suppose we had better speak to her, girls," said Mrs. Stewart, when she had somewhat recovered from the cruel assault; "shall we all go up together, and ask her how she is?"

"You may go, ma," replied Mary Jane; "I won't expose *myself* to the humiliation of being scorned. Clare will cut us, I'm sure; she is quite capable of it, and I would do it myself if I were in her place. *I* would never acknowledge cousins who gave me the cold shoulder, as we did her. I don't say it wasn't very much her own fault, but there it is; we parted out of friends, and she'll no more speak to any of us, than we shall to the ragged street boys, when we go out presently. What do you say, Sarah Jane?"

"I shan't trouble myself to show *her* any civility," replied that young lady; "I'm not going to sing small to a girl that I've snubbed and spited times without number. Perhaps we were mistaken, perhaps we weren't. Anyhow, I'm not going to give her the opportunity of paying me back in my own coin. She won't trouble us if we don't trouble her; let's leave well alone."

But Mrs. Stewart persisted, and it was finally settled that she should walk up to the transformed "Cousin Clare," and boldly offer to shake hands with her, at the same time asking the price of some lovely exotics that were for sale.

The girls, however, declined to remain and witness the discomfiture of their rash parent; they all adjourned to the coffee-room in quest of refreshment, and there Mrs. Stewart would almost immediately rejoin them.

Their coffee-cups were scarcely in their hands when she made her appearance, looking hot and vexed, and almost in tears. "There! don't say a word, girls," she cried, as she approached them. "No, I want something a little stronger than coffee—I must have a glass of wine. I've had a regular flooder, I can tell you; let me have my wine; I'll speak afterwards."

And presently she did speak. "I walked plump up to her," she said, "and looked her straight in the face. Well, she looked back again at me as if she had never seen me before in all her born days, and I says, 'Why, Clare, don't you know *me*? How well and bright you look,' and I put out my hand. Would you believe it, she took no notice whatever of it? But she made a grand sweeping curtsey, just as if she had been at Queen Victoria's Court her whole life long, and she says, 'I have not the honour, madam, of your acquaintance.' Quite civil-like, you know, but scornful and haughty; and the next minute she turned away all smiles and sweetness to the little dark lady whom she called Eva. I never was more taken-to in my life; she made me feel like dirt under her feet, and everybody stared at me, and one rude thing whispered in a stage aside, 'What an old harridan!' So I came away, and I've lost Bella in the crowd. Dear me! I wish I was at home."

Nothing was reported to Mr. Stewart of this adventure;

only Carrie assured him that they had enjoyed the bazaar immensely, but they were all so tired they had made up their minds not to go again, as they had fully intended, on the second day.

And when, the last thing at night, Mrs. Stewart and her elder daughters sat sipping their port-wine-negus over the fire, the matron said, with a sigh, “I’m afraid, my dears, we have made a mistake. But then, who would have thought that Clare Darlington would turn out to be a grand, fashionable lady? I don’t believe your father knows anything about her father’s people. Well, I won’t give anybody notice to quit, in the future, till I am quite sure they can never do me a good turn. It’s my firm belief, girls, that Clare is a member of the aristocracy. She always did look like a princess in disguise.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

“AND—AFTERWARDS?”

Gather your rosebuds while ye may,
Old time is still a-flying ;
And this same flower that smiles to-day
To-morrow will be dying.

C LARE’S career just now was as nearly satisfactory to herself as could be expected. At last she was living in the world for which she had so long pined, and manifold were her triumphs ; she promised to become, ere long, the fashion ; and Lady Forest, delighted at her brilliant success, and shining, herself, in the reflected honours of her *protégée*, lavished upon her unnumbered caresses, and deemed nothing too costly or too rare if it in any way contributed to her enjoyment.

The novel was quite laid aside, postponed till the authoress should find time for her literary labours. Just at present, she informed her friends, her duty lay in another direction,

She had resolved to give her beautiful young cousin every possible advantage, and her whole leisure was devoted to "the most conscientious chaperonage." A time would come when Clare—happily and splendidly married—would be off her hands, and then she would be only too glad to rest from worldly cares, and resume the pleasant toil which she loved so well. Meanwhile, it would do her no harm to enlarge her experiences ; there was no place like the ballroom, or the park, or the country house, for accurately studying human nature. Her novel would be all the better, all the more worthy acceptance by the public, for this period of relaxation ; she would rest upon her oars and gather fresh strength, while at the same time she accumulated material.

The grand bazaar, though it was such a wonderful and unwonted experience to the Stewarts, was only one of a series of festivities—and a not very important one, either—to Clare Darlington. Though it was, as everybody declared, "the depth of the dead season," she found life most delightful. "There is nothing like making the very best of what you have in hand," Lady Forest would say ; "always improve the occasion, my dear Clare. What is it your favourite poet says? 'Wisely improve *the Present* ; it is thine.' Just so ; Tennyson is a wise man, as I have always said. Oh, it is *Longfellow*, is it? Pretty much the same thing. Equally sound advice, in any case ; 'gather roses while you may,' you know, love ; 'make hay while the sun shines ;' *Carpe diem*, in short. We will take every advantage of to-day, to-morrow will bring its own affairs. What with one thing and another, we need not be dull, although it is the *dead season*."

"How long does the 'dead season' last ?" asked Clare of her instructress.

"Well, my dear, if you choose, you need not have any dead season at all. It is quite possible to manage so well that you may have a succession, one after another, of charming dissipations, if you only know how to do it. This, the 'dead season' *par excellence*, expires at Christmas ; that is, if you are in decent society. One always has one's house full at Christmas, or else one visits, as we are about to visit, at some country house where a thousand pleasant things are going on—charades, private plays, kettledrums, *tableaux*,

church-decorations, evening dances, select private balls, family dinner-parties, riding to the meet, skating—even snow-balling ! Oh, there is no end of the good things going on in a really good old country house like Chilling Towers.”

“ And how long is ‘ Christmas ’ supposed to last ? ”

“ Well, it runs its course at Twelfth Night, by the almanac; and by the calendar of our revered and beloved Church of England. But one need not be bound to the almanacs, or calendars, or anything of the sort. Once settled down at Chilling Towers, where I always feel at home, having been brought up there, I shall not think of changing my quarters till somewhere about Valentine’s Day ; unless, indeed, something very superior should present itself, which is not at all probable ; or unless there should be a very humdrum, stupid set at Chilling, which is not very probable, either.”

“ Well, cousin, what after Valentine’s Day ? ”

“ Then it is wisest, in every point of view, to return to one’s home, wherever that may be ; and ours, happily, is in Lowndes Square. However large our capacities, however seemingly limitless our powers, one *does* need an interval of seclusion, in which, not only to recuperate, physically and mentally, but to attend to many little matters which it is not prudent to neglect. Before a campaign, if it is to be a *victorious* one, sundry preparations have to be made ; there must be *councils of war* ; cabinet ministers must meet—you understand ? Then there comes a ‘ drawing-room,’ and engagements multiply, and the wheel goes round and round till you are pretty well tired of it ; you are quite ready to leave town at the end of June, or, at latest, by the middle of July, when, having over-polked, or over-waltzed, or over-dined yourself, you are glad of the peace and quiet of the country, for a week or two, before you go on the Continent, or to some fashionable watering-place, which is, perhaps, *almost* as exhausting as the season in town.”

“ And does that end the orthodox *season* ? ”

“ Not exactly ; the season is like royalty. It never dies, *in toto*. ‘ *Le roi est mort*,’ says the populace with a grave countenance, in an undertone. ‘ *Vive le roi !* ’ shouts the same populace, in almost the same breath, as it welcomes

with acclaim the succeeding sovereign. So it is with ‘the season,’ Clare. Country houses are open in the autumn ; invitations are rife ; sportsmen congregate and hold high carnival ; the huntsmen are in the field ; and there are such things as hunting-box-luncheons, and *al fresco* luncheons too, if the weather be only favourable. Five o’clock tea becomes a charming institution ; there are carpet-dances after dinner ; one runs down to Brighton for a week or two—for there is a *Brighton season* for the elect ; and so Christmas comes round again, and we begin to think once more of family gatherings and domestic festivities, as we are doing at this very moment. Meanwhile, we make the best use we can of the passing hour.”

“ But does not *Lent* cause some difference ? ”

“ Yes, it does. But then you go as far as you choose, and no farther ; your observance of Lent depends entirely upon ‘*the set*’ to which you belong. Some people abjure cards in Lent ; but that I think is ridiculous ! when so many recreations are denied you, how *are* you to rub on evening after evening without cards ? Still, my dear, it is bad form entirely to ignore Lent ; I always make a point of attending Divine service on Ash-Wednesday,—that Commination Service is indeed impressive, though it is awful, and it only comes *once a year* ! ”

“ Like Christmas. It is a comfort to think it does not come oftener. I don’t mind bewailing my sins in church, once in a year ; but I do not like *cursing*. I never could abide the maledictory psalms. Anathemas don’t suit me.”

“ Oh, *hush*, my dear, it is such *bad form* not to be a sound Churchwoman. However, we are quite alone, and I don’t mind admitting privately that I think that Commination Service is a relic of the dark ages, and ought to be done away with,—like King Charles the Martyr’s Day, and Gunpowder Plot, and the rest, you know, my dear.”

“ Papa used to say the whole Church of England just wanted turning upside down, and shaking inside out. Then there might be something like practical piety in the country.”

“ Dear me, how dreadful. Never repeat such words,

my dear ; your poor dear father *was* inconsiderate, I am sure, and said many things he did not really mean.”

“He meant *that*, and a great deal more. As to King Charles the First, he said he was a martyr to lying and deceit, and treachery of the worst description ; and the so-called regicides only did their duty ; and he used to uncover his head at the very mention of *Oliver Cromwell*.”

“My dear, how dreadful ! O pray say no more. It makes me quite ill to hear of such revolutionary and irreligious opinions. I knew that Richard Darlington was very peculiar ; I dare say it was that which divided him so entirely from his own family. Why, he must have been a Radical !—a Revolutionist !—a Red Republican !”

“He was a *Radical*, Cousin Forest, and he gloried in that name ; but he was not a Revolutionist, *nor* a Republican. He always said we in England combined all the advantages of Republicanism *and* Royalty. And he loved and revered Queen Victoria as the best of women and the most glorious of monarchs. He brought me up to be *loyal* to the backbone. He always drank the Queen’s health in a bumper, on her birthday.”

“And yet he uncovered when that fanatic and hypocrite, Oliver Cromwell, was mentioned ?”

“He uncovered to grandeur and goodness, to true royalty of soul. He despised the ignorance and narrow-mindedness that perverted all Cromwell’s actions. He *believed in him*. I have often heard papa say he had his work to do, and he did it ; and we of later days owe him a debt that can never be cancelled. Still, circumstances alter cases—there is no Cromwell needed now ; a revolution under Victoria’s mild, righteous, far-seeing rule would be worse than a mistake—it would be a *crime*.”

“All revolutions are crimes, my dear ; crimes against ‘society,’ if viewed in no other light. Pray let us dismiss Oliver Cromwell and all the rest of his vulgar crew from our conversation ; it is such bad taste in a woman to talk about politics, past or present. What made us speak of—the regicide ?”

“We spoke first of King Charles, mis-named *the Martyr*, and the abolition of the very blasphemous service dedicated

to his memory. We were talking about *Lent*, if I remember aright."

"Oh yes ; I said *entre nous*—strictly *entre nous*, mind—that I thought we might now dispense with a cursing liturgy. Still, understand that I hold it right to pay a certain regard to the occasion. Parliament does not sit on Ash Wednesday, and theatres are closed, so I would not give a dinner party or a ball on that evening ; it is vulgar to outrage public opinion, and I think it is quite as bad to be vulgar as to be wicked. Vulgarity, indeed, is a vice ; and one that is not confined, I fear, to the lower orders. But, *à propos* of Lent, it seems to me simply absurd to make such a fuss about it, as is the fashion now in certain circles. Why, there *are* people—and people in very good society, too—who give no dinner parties through Lent, and who will not enter a theatre, or a ball-room, nor even play a friendly game at cards. That is going to extremes. Avoid extremes, my dear, as you would avoid the plague. Go to church on Ash-Wednesday, whether you like it or not, and if there are any 'Lent lectures,' as they have come to be called,—by all means, attend them. One must sacrifice pleasure to duty occasionally."

"Certainly. I have heard of 'Lent lectures ;' what are they like ?"

"They are only sermons under another name, in honour of a certain ecclesiastical season ; they may be good, or they may be bad, and they make an excuse for going to church on week-days."

"Do many people go ? "

"Why, yes ; there is generally a good sprinkling, unless it rains, or snows, or fogs. Very few gentlemen, though, are present ; the congregation is principally composed of women ; but I think one feels all the better for sitting in church for an hour on a Wednesday or Friday ; there are the prayers, you know, and the prayers are always good, so comforting, and so devout. And you need not listen to the sermon, or '*lecture*,' if it is at all prosy, which it very often is."

"Then *the season* comes to a dead lock in Lent ?"

"It is sadly interrupted, yet on the whole I don't know but that a pause is really beneficial. In Passion Week,

Of course, one goes nowhere, and it is very good form to wear black, especially on Good Friday, which is always scrupulously observed in *my* house. I never allow anything but salt fish and potatoes, and egg sauce in the kitchen ; and I refrain from my rubber as I should if it were Sunday.”

“And what do we have for dinner upstairs, Cousin Forest ?”

“The same as downstairs, my dear. When you have an establishment of your own, always set your servants a good example. If any one is staying with me, I sometimes order oyster-soup, and a pudding. A jam roller comes in very well after salt cod.”

“I would rather omit the middle course, I think, and dine entirely on oyster-soup and pudding. I am very fond of jam roller, Cousin Forest, if it is nicely made. And I hope you allow dessert ?”

“A plain dessert, *only* a plain dessert. Just oranges, and dates, and apples, if there are any ; not *luxuries*, nothing forced, no *liqueurs*, just a glass of port or sherry, whichever may be preferred. Many people make a point of reading ‘The Whole Duty of Man’ on Good Friday. My dear mother did.”

“And Good Friday fairly over, I suppose one may go on the ordinary way again ?”

“Certainly ; and just now it is getting to be the fashion to go down to Brighton or Hastings, or to run over to Paris for *Easter*. When Parliament reassembles, the season sets in in real earnest, engagements thicken, the Academy opens, everybody is in town, the Park is full of an afternoon ; it is hard work sometimes, I assure you. But you will enjoy it ; there is nothing like it in the world, my dear, and one is *young* only once in a long life-time. Remember that.”

“*On n'est jeune qu'une fois,*” responded Clare. “Well, one may as well pluck roses as one passes, while the roses last. But—*afterwards?*”

“What ‘*afterwards?*’?”

“When one is young no more ; when one cannot dance round dances without losing one's breath ; when one's hair is thin and grey, and one does not feel fresh and sprightly in

the morning any longer. There must come a time when there are no roses to pluck, and when all sorts of pleasures pall upon you, when your heart does not beat to the music, nor your pulses bound at the voices of singing men and singing women ; the Scriptures say so, or something very like it."

" Well, my dear, we must all die, of course ; and I do not think I should care to live for ever, not even to extreme old age, unless I could ensure perpetual youth. It must be horrible to be old and ugly, a feminine edition of ' the lean and slippered pantaloons.' "

" You would prefer to be like the celebrated Lady Desmond, who lived through I don't know how many reigns, and danced a minuet on her ninetieth birthday. She, you know,

'Lived to the age of a hundred and ten,
And died by a fall from a cherry-tree then,
What a plucky old girl !'"

" Plucky indeed, rather *too* plucky. It was most unbecoming of her to climb a cherry-tree at all. Old women should not emulate girls. And that reminds me, my dear, never affect juvenility in your dress when your *première jeunesse* is past. Did you notice Mrs. Friske at the bazaar ?"

" That lady with a little bonnet on her little head—a matron, with the figure of nineteen and the face of sixty ?"

" The same ; she delights in being mistaken for her daughter, who is no chicken, but thirty, at the least ; and in an uncertain light it may happen, for they are about the same height, dress pretty much alike, and wear no caps—neither mother nor daughter."

" How ridiculous !—for the elder lady, at least. They did not interest me, either of them."

" Of course not, there is nothing interesting about them ; though they are entertaining enough in their way. I mean to put the Honourable Mrs. Friske in my novel, and Leonora Friske too. They are both oddities. I thought of using up poor Argles somehow ; but she is really *too* milk-and-watery, too *insignificant*. Now the Friskes are *som-bodies*."

“ Well, I promise you not to imitate Mrs. Friske, whom I shall probably never see again. I have rather a contempt for anything of the sort ; my Cousin Margery says she objects to an old ewe, dressed lamb-fashion ; and so do I. As soon as I am fifty—perhaps before—I will take to *caps*—handsome and becoming ones, of course, and I won’t go *décolleté*, or bare my skinny elderly arms. I’ll wear high dresses, or perhaps cut square on very festive occasions ; and sleeves at least down to the elbows. But my caps shall be *lovely*, and so becoming ; I shall look at least ten years my own junior in them. And if anybody takes me for my daughter—if I ever have one—I shall resent it as an insult ! But still, Cousin Forest, you have not answered my question :—when youth and beauty, and perhaps, alas ! health likewise, have passed away, and one only gets scratched with the thorns when one essays to gather *roses*—what then ?”

“ My dear, I have told you before that ‘in society’ these things are not discussed. The time *must* come, of course ; but why anticipate it *thus* ? Go on gathering roses as long as you possibly can, till the frost comes and nips them on the stem. *Then*, and not till then, trouble yourself about ‘the coming by-and-by.’ You are very young yourself, and so you can afford to chatter away about faded charms, and weary limbs, and all the rest of it ; but you should remember that I am more than thirty years your senior. I don’t disguise my age from *you*, but I do not let any one else suspect that I am full fifty ; and therefore my term of natural life dwindle rapidly. I can’t expect to enjoy myself as I have done much longer ; even now I am not the buoyant, sparkling, lissome creature I was a few years since. But I *won’t* look forward to trembling hands, and tottering steps, and grey hair under *close* caps, and no recreation save cards and scandal. And it is unkind of you, Clare, and not quite nice, certainly not *well-bred*, to remind me of the sere and yellow leaf.”

“ Dear cousin, I was thoughtless ; I will not speak again of advancing years and the burden they bring with them. But it was of myself rather than of you I was thinking. I am not so *very* young ; it seems a good while—and I have

passed through a good deal since I was seventeen, the age at which most girls are introduced ; I ought to be now in my *fourth season—or married*. I feel that my tenure of youth—real joyous youth—is rapidly diminishing. At twenty-five one is no longer in one's *première jeunesse*. At thirty it is not *jeunesse* at all ! ”

“ Well, my dear, talking about it will not make us one day younger. I may take to close caps and sermons some day ; who knows ? But till the inevitable hour approaches, I shall hold my own in the world of fashion ; and I strongly advise you, Clare, to dismiss from your mind, all melancholy forebodings, to check that too evident propensity for moralising, and be as happy as you possibly can. This is your time of roses ; like a sensible young woman ‘ pluck them ’ as you pass ! ”

And away went Lady Forest to consult Tarleton about the gown she was going to wear that evening ; her ladyship now had to hold grave conferences with her maid, who complained that her mistress was not nearly so easy to dress as she used to be ; she was so critical, and so difficult to please, and found fault so liberally, that her toilet was becoming a very serious and painful piece of business ; and Tarleton always drew breath and clasped her hands in thankfulness when at last it was satisfactorily accomplished, and my lady, armed with fan and bouquet, stepped in dignified complacency into her carriage.

And Clare, as she sat in her own room, taking her ease before she rang for her maid, reflected : “ I wish I could forget all about it ! Why cannot I live in the present, gather life’s roses as I pass, and be content ? I am sorry for some reasons that I ever went to the Abbey Mill ; I heard—I saw things there that I can never forget, they haunt me continually ; some verse of a hymn, some text of Scripture, is always recurring, unbidden, to my mind. Cousin Robert said I should never be *satisfied* till I found Christ. He said I should go on drawing water from the cisterns of this world, and yet be always athirst. He said, too, I should always be *yearning* for something better and higher than I had yet found ; and I do believe he spoke the truth. I am not satisfied. I sit at the banquet of life, I drink of the

sparkling wine at will—the wine of genius, of intellectual strength ; I can eat, drink, and be merry, yet I am hungry and thirsty still. No ; I am *not* satisfied.

"I am afraid I am of a restless and discontented nature. Why cannot I take the good the gods provide, and be at peace? Something has been awakened within me that will not be lulled to sleep again. I am always listening to a voice that whispers, 'The end of these things is *death*.' What things? There can be no harm in dancing and dressing, and feasting either body or soul. There can be no harm in *cards*, unless one makes them an excuse for gambling. I used to like them ; I am beginning to think them rather stupid things. Cousin Forest is so very fond of them, and the sight of them disgusts me sometimes. I am so tired of that foolish, senseless *bézique*, and I don't like *whist* much better. I think with Edie, we must be rather in a bad way when we play at cards to get through an evening. No, there is no harm in the cards themselves, there cannot be ; nor in dancing, nor in dressing, nor in dining ; the harm is, I suppose, in being *satisfied* with them. The world won't hurt us, Cousin Margery says ; it's not the world, but the love of it that does the harm, and what else did she say, '*The kingdom of God is within you*'? And if it is *not* within, it may be all around, and above, and below, and it does not matter ; it is of no account. That is what she meant, but I cannot understand it. There, it is time I rang for Susanne ; I will think no more about it."

And Clare did her best to "think no more about it," and to a great extent she succeeded. Day after day, and night after night, she pursued the giddy round of the seeker after pleasure, and her life went merrily as marriage bells. Still, it was only "a round." Surely, *some day* she must attain some end, reach some far-off goal, and be *satisfied*. Was she never to be contented in the present? Was she always to be stretching out to some invisible, blissful future that should fill her heart with calm joy and quiet rapture?

Was it *love*, pure, holy love that should fill her soul? She had never really loved ; her heart's depths had not yet been stirred. She had had her girlish fancies ; she had had

countless admirers, several actual suitors, even ; but not one true lover, to be all the world to her. She was waiting yet for the passing-by of her heart's king. Was it indeed a truth that—

“Man never is, but always to be, blest”?

CHAPTER XIX.

AT CHILLING TOWERS.

“That chamber is the Ghostly.”

ON the twenty-second of December Lady Forest and her *protégée* found themselves arriving at Chilling Towers, where they were courteously received by Sir Francis and Lady Rosamund Darlington. There was already a goodly company assembled, but several more guests were expected in a few days ; and with the New Year was to arrive His Grace the Duke of Acresworth, who, according to report, was fabulously rich, and avowedly seeking a second bride, after a prolonged term of widowerhood.

Clare was delighted with the place, “where she would have had a chance of being brought up,” Lady Forest informed her, but for her father’s peculiarities and bad management. She did not remember her mother very well ; but her father had always spoken of her with deep affection, and he had unfeignedly mourned her loss. Still, her painful intercourse with the Stewarts had reminded her that her mother *was* a Stewart ; though, of course, vastly superior to any of her kinsfolk in Kilmarnock Gardens ; and she could not but wish that Mr. Darlington had made some other choice, and married a lady of his own social rank. Then she would have been always in her proper sphere, and never in the anomalous position in which she had so frequently found herself, and into which, alas ! she might possibly relapse ; for at times she felt a certain misgiving as to the *tenure of enjoyment*. Cousin Forest was not, she feared,

the most dependable person in the world ; she too often illustrated the position of the "man" in the old ballad ; who lived with—

" One foot on sea and one on shore,
To one thing constant never ! "

That is to say, if there were any truth in the little stories that were rife everywhere, as to her ladyship's manifest deficiency in the article of "constancy." So far, Lady Forest had made a *pet*, a little goddess, of Clare Darlington. She was fair, she was young, she was brilliant, she could do no wrong ; she could speak her mind without drawing down upon herself the avalanches of wrath from which poor Argles had suffered so much, and of which Tarleton sometimes complained ; she could take liberties, such as had never been permitted before, it was averred, and the influence she possessed "over my lady" was literally *astounding*.

But then, as Mrs. Tarleton said one day to her subordinate Susanne, "who could say how soon her ladyship would weary of her pretty toy?" Any day there might be a change, and the wind might drop round into just the opposite quarter, and clouds would overspread the sky, and the domestic weather-glass would point to "stormy" continuously. For Mrs. Tarleton was an old and trusted servant, and it suited her convenience to "put up" with her ladyship's tantrums ; and, as she often said, "hard words didn't break no bones ; and good wages, and excellent perquisites, and tolerably light duties, buttered one's bread most pleasantly !"

And Tarleton went on to remark that my lady never could be trusted to sticking to one thing, or to one person, for any length of time ; she was as changeable as the wind, and as fickle as an April day. When she took up with a new whim or fancy there was nothing else to be thought of ; everything and everybody must bow down to the rising sun, which, however, sometimes suffered sudden and total eclipse. My lady had had her fancy before, times without number ; oh, the companions that had been "such treasures !" the girls that had been "such sweet interesting creatures !" Why

even poor Miss Argles had had her little day, though it was of the very briefest. Tarleton had seen so many favourites come and go that "she couldn't be surprised at anything;" and she was quite prepared for the sudden dethronement of the new idol, whose reign had already lasted longer than anyone expected.

And something of this Clare had begun to understand. Partially from common report, and partially from her own observation, she could not help suspecting something of the truth. All was fair and smiling now ; things went smoothly and merrily ; there was scarcely a crumpled roseleaf to disturb her sweet repose, still less a real "crook in the lot." *Only—only!* who should dare to predict how long this beautiful state of things might continue ?

Lady Forest, however, was in her most amiable mood when she sat down to afternoon tea in Lady Rosamund's boudoir ; and never had she smiled more graciously upon "her darling," than on that first evening at The Towers, when Clare's grace and beauty had fairly taken all hearts by storm.

"Is she not lovely?" asked her ladyship of her hostess when they were having their confidential chat at bedtime. "Confess now that I did not exaggerate her charms, when I asked permission to bring her with me? I knew you would appreciate such an addition to your Christmas party."

"She is extremely beautiful," was the reply ; "I have seldom seen a lovelier girl. And she is poor Dick Darlington's daughter—our own kith and kin. To think we did not even know there was such a person in the world. How did you unearth your charming namesake, Clare?"

"Quite by accident. Our meeting was really an adventure. I was struck by her looks and by her uncommon style before I knew her name—when she called herself 'Clare Darlington' I could have embraced her upon the spot. I asked her to Silverbeach, where I then was staying, and I at once implored her to come and live with me, and be my amanuensis."

"And is she acting in that capacity?"

"No, indeed! I should be ashamed to make a quill-driving slave of such a creature; she is far too bright, too

ethereal, too altogether exquisite for anything of the kind. Unlike the poet's ideal woman, she is too fair and good for common use. She has been with me now three months, and I congratulate myself daily and almost hourly on the prize I have discovered."

"And what are you going to do with her?"

"Introduce her, of course! I shall present her at the first drawing-room; she has never been presented. Her mother died when she was quite a child, and I don't know that it would have made any difference if she had lived, for Richard Darlington, as you know, perpetrated a sad *mésalliance*. She was a tradesman's daughter, I fancy, but I am not sure; I have never asked; the less said on such a painful subject the better. Certainly she was not one of *ourselves*; and it is really a good thing for the poor girl that she is not hampered with an unproducible mother. She will make a sensation, I am positive; Royalty itself will almost certainly condescend to notice so singularly fair a *débutante*! I quite anticipate her being the *belle* of the season."

"How old is she?"

"Only twenty-one last summer. Of course she ought to have been properly brought out three years ago. If she had been my own, instead of my adopted daughter, I should have had her satisfactorily established by this time. I cannot think what her father was about—for he was very fairly in literary society, especially in Paris, where he was quite the centre of a little circle of *littérateurs* and *virtuosi*;—not to settle her properly, according to his ability. Such a splendid girl; and to be unengaged—*unattached* too, happily—at one-and-twenty. And, to tell you the truth, Rosamund, I had great hopes of finding *le bon parti* at Chilling Towers; your circle is always such a very select one; I should have scarcely taken such an accomplished beauty anywhere else, before introducing her in town."

"I shall be delighted to do *mon possible* for you and for her, too, for I shall have no girls of my own on hand for many a long day. My pets are in the nursery—not even in the schoolroom, as yet—and really one does not see such a face every day. Well, there is Captain Morgan in the house

already, a fine young fellow, with a fair estate, I am told ; but I know little of him, except that he is something of a *dandy*. Your beautiful Clare deserves something far better than he possibly can offer."

"Ah, that young man who has a slight lisp. He is decidedly ineligible—I should count him among the *detriments*. How about the clergyman ? "

"Worse still. Very well-born, and of course well-connected. He *may* succeed in life, for there is a family living, I know, and he will not be devoid of patronage, but I am afraid he is not particularly clever ; if he were a nobody by birth he would remain a struggling curate to the end of his days. His people only put him into the Church, I fancy, because he had no brains to speak of, and because they knew they could command influence. Never think of him. But what do you say to the *Duke* ? "

"Ah ! that would indeed be a success ! But I can scarcely dare to hope for so splendid an alliance. And yet beauty like hers is so rare ; she is a Darlington, too. And I never saw a better style—a more perfect *pose*. So much is certain, she would adorn the highest rank ; a ducal coronet would well become those queenly brows."

"It would. And I promise you, Clare, that she shall have every opportunity, every advantage. I had no idea of such utter loveliness ; for you know, Clare, your swans so often turn out to be only geese. Nay, do not look offended ; I confess that on this occasion you might have said ten times more than you did : you have surpassed the wildest flights of fancy. But I wish I had not asked little Miss Vanderquist."

"Who is she ? I never met her, I think."

"Perhaps not. But she is a very charming personage, I assure you, though scarcely pretty. She is *petite—piquante*. Not very young, not at all indeed ; but then the Duke is turned fifty, and he has a married son. And Dorothea Vanderquist is a great heiress, and clever and striking, and all that sort of thing. I thought she might not object to being a duchess, though she is a most impracticable person, and declares, with all the gravity in the world, that she will *never marry*."

"She will scarcely rival my Clare, though, *except* in fortune, and that cannot be an object with the Duke."

"I should say not, he has plenty of his own ; though money has an affinity for money, I have always observed. Miss Darlington is not well-dowered, you say ?"

"She has about enough to buy her silk laces and hairpins. But I do not mind telling you, Rosamund, that I shall leave all I have to her if she marries to my entire satisfaction, and she will have a nice little *dot* into the bargain. The Duchess of Acresworth shall not go to her husband empty-handed, if her Grace's maiden name be *Darlington*. When does Miss Vanderquist arrive ?"

"To-morrow. I think you need not apprehend any rivalry from *her*. The only doubt is whether the Duke, taking into account his own age, may not prefer thirty-eight to twenty-one. I have a faint idea that I saw the birth of a *grandson* in the newspaper the other day."

"Oh, I hope not ; at any rate, do not breathe such a thing in Clare's hearing. She has peculiar fancies, learned strange notions from her father I am afraid ; and she has opinions of her own, and can hold them, too, persistently—almost obstinately. And she might take exception to a bridegroom who would at once confer on her the rank and dignity of *grandmamma*."

"She might, of course ! But one can hardly imagine a girl so squeamish. She has not been very well brought-up, you say ?"

"Not as we count 'well brought-up.' A properly educated girl would not hesitate ; as it is, it is quite on the cards she may, if she has the slightest suspicion of our delightful little conspiracy. She has such queer prejudices, such ultra theories on so many points. She has had her complement of lovers, of course ; such a girl is as certain as King Cophetua's 'beggar maid' to be admired and courted. But no one, she assures me, has made the least impression on her ; she never yet saw the man for whose sake she would renounce her freedom ; she has, with scarcely a moment's consideration, rejected *every* proposal. She requires too much in marriage, I often tell her."

"Surely the Duke will meet her requirements ;—rank,

wealth, honourable distinction. Have you ever seen him?"

"Yes, in his late Duchess's lifetime ; he was not bad-looking, if I recollect aright, but rather ponderous, rather slow of speech."

"Yes, he *does* stammer a little ; and he is a heavy talker. As for *looks*, well, that is a mere matter of taste. I think, for a man of his years, he is rather attractive ; not handsome certainly, but then not plain. I need not caution you to be silent with Clare ; girls are so perverse, even really charming girls, that they sometimes turn restive, simply because they fancy that this sort of thing is being *arranged* for them."

"Trust me, Rosamund, I would not on any account be so indiscreet as to give Clare the merest hint of the future we hope to secure to her ; she would be on her high horse directly, and she would try her very best to disgust the Duke. She thinks marriages are made in heaven, poor child, and she will brook no interference from any quarter. She said so plainly, the other day, when I was jesting with her about a certain young baronet, who was palpably smitten ; it was only a jest, for the young fellow has inherited nothing but a bare title, and a hopelessly mortgaged estate."

"Well, we know how to keep our own counsel ; and the Duke is old enough and experienced enough to play his own game. Interference is not necessary : any kind of meddling would be worse than superfluous. We shall only *throw them together*, and leave the rest to Providence. Good-night, it is dreadfully late ; Francis will scold me, if he has left the billiard-room. Go to sleep, my Lady Forest, and dream of Clare—Duchess of Acresworth."

Clare was soon extremely popular among the young people assembled at Chilling Towers. She was in the highest spirits, and ready for riding, skating, dancing, charades, or *tableaux*—or whatever presented itself as the entertainment of the hour. Sir Francis declared that he was proud to present her to his friends as Miss Darlington ; he had never in all his life seen so brilliant and beautiful a creature ; so unaffected, so genuine. Lady Forest even thought he praised her a little too much ; she was glad that Rosamund was not at all of a jealous disposition—or, there

was no knowing ; it would be so decidedly inconvenient for Rosamund to be ever so little estranged.

She awaited with some small trepidation the appearance of Miss Vanderquist, who came to 'The Towers a day behind her time. But at the first glance her every apprehension fled ; the heiress was *not* pretty certainly, and not so very "*piquante*" in her estimation. She was "*petite*," no doubt—she was scarcely up to Clare's shoulder, but of fairy-like proportions. And during the first evening, Lady Forest found her rather dull, by no means the sparkling *causeuse* her fancy had pictured her. No, she could not stand for one moment any comparison with her beautiful, regal Clare ; but then there was the Duke, and it was quite impossible to foresee what incomprehensible fancy *he* might take. Also, *he might*, there was no saying—he might be unable to resist the attractions of a *quarter of a million of money*, for so much did rumour accredit to the little lady. It was whispered about everywhere that Dorothea Vanderquist had "two hundred and fifty thousand charms," and she might be *the fashion*, if she would only take the trouble to show herself a little more. The curate and the captain looked at her, and at each other, and spoke with bated breath.

"The Duke of Acresworth is coming on New Year's Eve," Lady Rosamund carelessly remarked the day after Christmas Day. "He has never recovered his spirits since the death of his wife : I hope you young ladies will be very kind to him, and do your best to restore his cheerfulness. I asked him here on purpose ; I am sure you will like him, Miss Vanderquist."

"I have met him before," replied Miss Vanderquist ; "and I knew the Duchess, though not intimately ; people said she was not a happy wife."

"Ah, my dear, scandal is always so busy, and has such a venomous, tireless tongue. Never listen to *on dits*—they are so often uncharitable, even cruel. I know, on very good authority, that the Duke is a most exemplary person, and literally *adored* his wife, who was a great invalid, and perhaps of a peevish disposition."

It so happened that Clare Darlington and Dorothea

Vanderquist took to each other amazingly, and became quite intimate and confidential before they had spent more than eight-and-forty hours together. The two elder ladies were uncertain as to the desirability of this sudden friendship, but they concluded to let matters proceed just as they would, unhindered by them. There was a curious disparity in their ages, no doubt; but then girls often do fall devotedly in love with women many years their senior. Clare would not see her twenty-second birthday till next summer; Miss Vanderquist owned boldly to thirty-eight last March.

Now, it was well known throughout the house, and especially in the servants'-hall, that Chilling Towers was *haunted!*—at least the older portion of it, the part that dated from the time of the Plantagenets—and it was only in the fitness of things that so ancient and patrician a family as the Darlings should have *its own particular ghost*. Sometimes the ghost behaved itself with all proper discretion, and kept itself in modest retirement, so that months and even years passed without the household being subjected to its awful visitations. Then, again, it would suddenly, and without sufficient cause, manifest an inclination to return to society, and it would disport itself accordingly, causing unpleasant disturbances night after night. There were certain rooms and corridors to which it seemed irresistibly attracted; and it so happened that Clare's was one of these, and some one who was well up in ghost-lore, and knew all about the Towers' ghost, had the unkindness to tell her that she was sleeping in “one of the haunted chambers.”

Now, if Clare had a weak point, it was her dread of the supernatural; she had once in her life, as she believed, *seen a ghost*; and she shuddered and shivered at the remembrance of that terrible experience. Miss Haberton, the young lady to whose good offices she owed the unwelcome intimation of her danger, had found this out; and being just a little envious of the admiration lavished on Clare, and very much so of her ravishing *toilettes*, she amused herself by the disclosure of the secret of the house, and took a spiteful pleasure in relating all the current legends of the place.

Miss Haberton, though still holding the style and title of a "young lady," was really just a little *on the wane*. Some people unkindly remarked of her that she was "no chicken"! direful words to be spoken of one still classing herself with the juniors, and still *on her preferment*. She owned to twenty-five; her intimate friends declared she would never see *forty* again; one of them, her *bosom friend*, privately informed *her* "bosom friend" that Flora Haberton had just celebrated her forty-fifth birthday! She would not have minded being *fifty*, could she have printed on her cards the desired matronly prefix. And as she had great hopes of both the captain and the curate, particularly of the latter, and both of them were manifestly inclined to worship at the shrine of the youthful beauty—for twenty-one seemed *very* youthful to Miss Haberton—she felt an inexplicable and insurmountable dislike to poor Clare, and freely admitted to herself that she owed her *a grudge*.

And just then she discovered, from the housemaid who waited on her in her bedroom, that "the ghost" was "walking again," and that all the under-servants were scared out of their senses, and intending to "give notice" as soon as the Christmas party should begin to break up. So she affected to be very friendly with her innocent rival, and took the first opportunity of telling her in detail the whole gruesome history. She did not believe a word of it herself; she had not an atom of credulity in her composition; and she had never had the honour of interviewing a real ghost; when she had, she should of course put faith in supernatural appearances. And Clare listened and shivered, and lost all her beautiful delicate bloom, to the unutterable delight of her cruel enemy. "But I pray you, respect my confidence," continued Miss Haberton; "Lady Rosamund will never forgive me if she knew I had breathed a word about the family ghost. I must beg you to promise me *on your honour* to be perfectly silent on the subject. Above all, you must not whisper a syllable to Lady Forest; the house would be too hot to hold me if you did. And you would do *me* a great and irretrievable injury. *Swear* to keep my secret, Miss Darlington."

"I will not *swear*, but I will promise," replied Clare, in a

cold and sunken voice ; “a Darlington’s promise is as binding as an oath. But oh, *why* did you tell me ? How shall I ever sleep in that awful room by myself !”

“ Oh ! the ghost may never trouble you. I would not have told you had I known that you were so foolish ; I quite thought you had been stronger-minded. Of course, it is all nonsense ; some trick of the servants,—the lower classes are alike mischievous *and* superstitious. It is striking eleven, I declare ; I am so sleepy, let us go to bed and forget all about the ghost. Shut your eyes, and say the multiplication table backwards, you will soon drop off ; I have tried it many times. And you will only wake to hear the servant at the door, with your hot water. Good-night.”

And away went Miss Haberton yawning, and inwardly chuckling to think how little sweet sleep Clare would enjoy that night ; and she began to calculate how many watchful nights it would take to spoil that exquisite complexion. Clare retreated to her room, carefully locking the door behind her ; her teeth chattering for all the blazing fire upon the hearth. She lighted her “ eight hours’ nightlight,” but she was dismayed to perceive how faintly it glimmered through the gloom : then she resolved to leave unextinguished one of the wax-candles on her table ; it was pretty well burnt down, but it would last for a couple of hours, if not longer.



CHAPTER XX.

LITTLE MISS VANDERQUIST.

“ Thou comest in such questionable shape
That I will speak to thee.”

NEXT morning Clare appeared at the breakfast table with a grave, quiet countenance, and with so little colour in her cheeks, that Miss Haberton felt—not remorse,

but a good deal of uneasiness, lest inquiries as to the cause thereof should be instituted by the elders. She was greatly relieved when she heard Clare reply, in answer to some question, "A little faceache, that is all, thank you I could not sleep well."

"Now I wonder," thought Miss Haberton, as she daintily consumed her game pie, "how much truth there is in that excuse. Has she really got a troublesome tooth, or did she fancy she saw *something*, or did she lie wide awake for hours, listening, in a cold perspiration, to every rustle of the tree outside her window, or to the nervous beating of her heart?"

All the day, it was quite evident to Miss Darlington's admirers that she was not in her usual spirits. Lady Forest attributed her depression to indigestion, and blamed the mince-pies; while Lady Rosamund declared that *their* mince-pies could scarcely disorder an infant. Miss Vanderquist watched Clare somewhat anxiously. There was certainly something amiss with her—more than appeared on the surface—and she determined to find out the cause of disturbance.

It was a brilliant winter's day, and there was skating on the great pool in the park. Clare skated, as she did most other things, with infinite ease and grace, and the frosty air brought back the delicate pink to her pensive cheek. The Curate and the Captain were more madly in love than ever, and very nearly quarrelled as to which should put on and take off her skates.

It was proposed during the afternoon that a *charade*—"quite impromptu, you know"—should be acted after dinner; and the last half-hour of dim, fading light was devoted to rummaging among sundry old chests and presses in the lumber-room, in search of ancient *sacques* and hoops and quilted petticoats. Clare almost recovered her gaiety amid the wild fun and frolic that prevailed in these upper stories among the gables of the roof, and she was beginning to rehearse, in a grandmother's costume that Lady Rosamund had unearthed expressly for her benefit, when Miss Haberton faintly whispered, "How dark it is growing! I declare I feel quite superstitious among all these relics of

the elder days. I would not be left alone here for the world."

The words so gently uttered seemed to awake a feeling of uneasiness in more minds than one. Several of the young ladies were observed to look apprehensively through the gathering dusk, and to chatter very fast, as though they wished to keep up their spirits; and one outspoken damsel declared she must go down into the lamplight and dance the *Roger de Coverley* straight off, or she would certainly see something that was uncanny. Poor Clare had succeeded for a while in throwing off her nervous tremours, but the closing in of the evening reminded her that the long, dark, lonely hours she dreaded would soon be hers, and Miss Haberton's affected little shiver recalled the misery she had suffered all through the wakeful night.

The evening, however, passed gaily away. The *charade* was admirably acted, and Clare was the life and soul of the party—the queen of the entertainment. She forcibly put from her the thought of the coming night—of her solitary imprisonment in the haunted room. She knew by this time the exact appearance of the ghost. She might expect a middle-sized, elderly woman, with silvered hair, almost white, and wicked, black eyes, under frowning brows, and she was dressed in scarlet and black, and carried an antique chamber candlestick in her hand. She was, of course, revisiting the scenes of her former crimes; and her portrait, more than two hundred years old, might still be seen in one of the galleries of the more ancient portion of the house.

It was in vain that Clare took herself to task and tried to ridicule her own folly. It was childish, *vulgar*, even, to believe in ghosts; and while the daylight lasted, and as long as she was in society, she could afford to smile at her silly fears, and to determine to brace herself for the coming solitude, which could not actually be more terrible than the present hours. She lingered as long as she could, saying good-night to Lady Forest, wishing all the time she had not pledged her word to keep to herself Miss Haberton's communication, and longing, too, for some excuse for asking Lady Rosamund to change her room. When the time came for separation, she felt as if she could have welcomed the com-

onest little kitchenmaid as her companion ; even one of the hated Stewart cousins would have been received with effusion.

At last she was once more in the dreaded chamber. The fire burned brightly ; two large candles were alight on the dressing-table, and two more on the mantel-piece ; no room could possibly look more pleasant and less eerie ; there was not the slightest scent of ghosts in the atmosphere, she told herself, by way of self-assurance. But she sat a long time in her dressing-gown over the glowing fire, hoping to feel drowsy, and she started, and every pulse throbbed, when the clock struck twelve. It was "the witching hour of night ! "

She had just made up her mind to undress at once, and seek the bed that invited to repose, when she was sure she heard footsteps in the corridor without. She listened intently, her senses preternaturally sharpened, but all was still. It was, perhaps, some belated servant, she thought, stepping softly lest she should disturb any slumberer ; or her fancy had deceived her. The next moment, however, the handle of her door was slowly and gently turned ; how she rejoiced to know that it was locked *and* bolted. She sat frozen with terror, quite unable to stir ; the handle moved again, but there was no sound. In sheer desperation she shrieked out, "Who is there ?" She scarcely knew her own voice, it was so shrill and husky ; she might have been struggling with a nightmare.

To her infinite relief, a familiar voice answered, "It is I, Dorothea ; I want to come in."

It was not a moment's work to unlock and open the door ; and, oh, what a comfort it was to see little Miss Vanderquist, snugly wrapped in her dressing-gown, waiting for admission !

"I am afraid I frightened you, dear," said Dorothea, when she was fairly in the room, and the door was locked again. "I was afraid to knock lest I should awake you out of your first sleep. Would you mind taking me in for to-night ?"

"I shall be only too thankful !" replied Clare, joyfully. "They have been talking such nonsense to-day, and yesterday too, that I am really as nervous as a kitten."

"What sort of nonsense ?"

"Oh, about the ghost—the ghost that haunts this wing, you know. Have you heard anything of it?"

"Oh, yes ; there are whispers of it all over the house ; my own poor little maid trembled so much she could hardly undress me. Some of the servants are talking seriously of 'getting the master to have *it laid*' ! I should like to be here when the process is gone through."

"Oh, Dorothea, how can you laugh over such a ghastly joke?"

"My pet, you look quite ill. I have thought you not yourself all day. Did anything happen to frighten you last night?"

"Nothing ; only I was told all about it, just before I went to bed ; and, more than all, I was informed that *this is—the haunted room!*"

"Who told you, Clare?"

"I cannot tell you, Dolly. I promised not to divulge the secret."

"Divulge fiddlesticks, my dear ! There has been a ghost at Chilling Towers for the last century, at the least. The whole neighbourhood knows of it—and some people believe in it."

"You do not?"

"Of course I do not. Clare, I fancy I know who frightened you out of your poor little wits, and then bound you over to secrecy. It is just like one of her tricks. I have been making some discoveries to-day ; maids *will* chatter, you know, and sometimes it is quite as well to listen to their gossip. I have been enlightened thereby."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, I think I can lay the ghost by my own unaided skill. But say nothing till I bid you speak ; keep my secret as faithfully as you have kept Flora Haberton's."

"Who said anything about Miss Haberton?"

"No one ; only I have pretty good reasons for suspecting her to be at the bottom of the mystery. Not that she was clever enough to invent the plot—the ghost was ready-made to hand—and one of the servants likes a little amusement at the expense of the nerves of her fellow-creatures. I think I know how the ghost, who has stayed peaceably in

the church vaults for the last seven years, has begun 'to walk' again. Miss Haberton has been here for several months ; she is a sort of connection of Lady Rosamund's, and she is paying her a prolonged visit ; she knows the ins and outs of Chilling Towers as well as if she were an inmate."

"Then, do you think she is the originator of the scare ?"

"No, I am sure she is not, though I fancy she knows who is, and, perhaps, works with her ; certainly aids and abets her, either openly or covertly—the latter, I hope, for her dignity's sake. The plot has thickened within the last day or two, and, quite by accident, as it would seem—only, Clare, I do not believe in accidents, because I firmly believe in *Providence*—I have scented it. I know Flora does not like you, and she would do you an evil turn if she could ; she thought she would frighten you out of your senses, and make you ill and miserable."

"And she has pretty well succeeded, thanks to my own weak-minded credulity. What is that ? Did you not hear a rustle ?"

"I did. I have a great mind to get up and interview the ghost ; she is out there in the corridor. I caught a glimpse of her as I came here."

"Of the *ghost* ? of the wicked Lady Betty ?"

"I saw Miss Haberton, dressed very much as Lady Betty's portrait appears. She is very well got-up, I assure you. Shall we go out, and pay our respects to her ?"

"Oh, no ; it is too comfortable under the bed-clothes ; the night is very cold. Are you sure, quite sure, it was Miss Haberton ?"

"As sure as I can be of anything. But I have not yet matured my plans. I will leave her to her masquerading to-night ; to-morrow I will decide how to act, for, of course, this wicked folly cannot go on."

"I hope I have not betrayed her ; I promised her, *on the word of a Darlington*, that I would not."

"Calm yourself, she is her own betrayer ; you have told me nothing, beyond admitting that she was the person who first alarmed you. And that reminds me ; this is *not* the room of doubtful repute ; it has been turned into a

bath-room ; the present ghostess actually does not know her own *habitat*."

"Oh, Dorothea, how can I thank you sufficiently ? If you had not come to my rescue, I think I should have been half-dead by morning. I was sure I heard something in the corridor."

"And I was sure you were being practised upon, somehow ; you have gone about all day with a *haunted look*, and your hands were cold and damp when we parted at the top of the great staircase. Then I got a clue from my poor frightened maid ; and when I had sent her to spend the night with Lady Rosamund's woman, I shut up my room and came here to you. You were more scared, even, than I expected to find you."

"I am afraid I am very silly and weak-minded. Are you sleepy, Dolly ?"

"Not at all ; I am too excited to sleep just yet."

"And I, too, feel dreadfully wide awake, notwithstanding my weariness. So let us talk a little while longer, if you do not mind. I want you to tell me whether you are *quite* ghost-proof."

"I am afraid I scarcely understand."

"I mean, have you no latent fear, no instinctive dread of the supernatural ?"

"I could not say honestly that I have not. No person, either educated or uneducated, is entirely free from the incomprehensible shrinking from spiritual manifestations of any kind. That there is some link between the unbound spirits of the world beyond the grave, and our spirits still confined in flesh, I think we cannot doubt—a thousand things go to prove it. And why should it be otherwise ? The idea is not distressing, rather the reverse. But that the spirits of the dead, the wicked dead especially, should come forth, and array themselves in their former semblances, even to earthly apparel, is simply preposterous. To believe such an absurdity is a folly—a proof of ignorance, I was going to say ; it is a sin !"

"How can it be a sin ?"

"Because God is over all, and our trust is in *Him*. We are His children, He is our Father. Would a human father

allow his little ones to be terrified to no good end? Surely he would not; unless he were a monster inconceivable. And will our Father in heaven, our dear Lord, allow us to be tormented by wicked spirits returning to their earthly haunts? Oh, no; God is always with us—about our bed, as about our path. He guards us by night, as well as by day; ‘the darkness and the light are both alike to Him.’ Let us think of Him as our Rock and our Fortress, as our everlasting Refuge, and all will be well. You do trust Him, dear?”

“I don’t know; I am afraid I do not, as I ought to, trust Him. I am not a Christian, except in form; God is not my hope and joy—my strong salvation. He is not to me what I know and see that He is to others who believe in Him. But I think you are right when you say *He* would not allow us to be frightened by ghostly spiritual appearances. Do you think, though, that the *dead* never come back?”

“On the contrary, I think they do, though only *visibly* in some supreme moment of awful extremity—perhaps only in that hour when we are being unclothed of mortality; when the house of this earthly tabernacle is being dissolved; when we tread the threshold of another world; then I think the dying vision *may* see those beloved ones who have gone before. The veil that hangs between the mortal and the immortal is so thin that we may gaze beyond it; for the moment we are, as it were, of two worlds; then we pass into the great joy of Eternity.”

“Yes; it is terrible to think of *death*.”

“Of what the world *calls* death, you mean. There is no such thing to the Christian as death. His Father calls him, and he obeys. Strong in faith and hope, he leaves this ‘encumbering clay,’ and is for ever with the Lord. Believe me, Clare, there is *no death*. The world recedes, it disappears—that is all. And Christ is there to receive the poor, tired child.”

“But if Christ has been no more than a name in this life?”

“That is too sad to think of. Come to Christ *now*, and be happy, safe always, in life, in death.”

"And death is *not* to be feared, you say?"

"Not if Christ is yours, and you are His. *He* tasted death for all men, if only they will have it so. I think it is dear, good *George Macdonald* who says, 'What men call death is but its shadow. Death never comes near us; it lies behind the back of God.' Christ, when He drained the bitter cup, left it there. It may be His will that our mortal part should suffer in the 'article of death,' as we say, for want of a better expression; but our immortal part need dread no pain, no agony of death. We are, and ever shall be, in the hands of One who never, in any case, failed one trembling, trusting child."

The next morning Clare looked bright and well again, though, perhaps, a little more thoughtful than usual, and the day passed happily. It was agreed that Miss Vanderquist should again share her friend's room, though that little arrangement was not spoken of to anybody. Miss Haberton looked dark and mysterious, and sometimes, Clare fancied, a little doubtful and uneasy. Unless Miss Vanderquist was under a great mistake, the fair Flora had plenty on her hands.

During the day, Mrs. Tarleton had something to say about "the ghost." The servants of the upper table pooh-poohed the whole affair, and yet she was sure they were all privately a little nervous. The under-servants were suffering from a veritable scare, and went about in little groups of twos and threes after dark. "They'll give notice, half of them, the day after 'Twelfth-night,'" said Tarleton, gravely, as she arranged Clare's hair; "and, really, I don't wonder. It's not pleasant to live in a house with a ghost that goes stalking up and down the passages. The question is, *What is it?—who is it?*"

"Has Lady Rosamund heard about it, I wonder?"

"That she has, and so has Sir Francis. Mrs. Marabout told my Lady Rosamund what stories were going through the house, two nights ago, when Fanny, the little housemaid that attends to the bath-room, *saw* the thing, and fell senseless. And Sir Francis's valet said his master did *ought* to know, and I do think he was right. But both were told to say nothing, except to discredit the report as far as they

could, till the visitors were gone. And *then* Sir Francis declares the ghost shall catch it, for he'll make the Towers too hot to hold him, or her rather ; for all are agreed that it is a *she*-ghost."

" You do not believe in it, of course, Tarleton ? "

" Why, no, Miss Clare, I *don't* ; and yet I must own my flesh creeps and my hair stands on end when I hear how the horrid thing flits up and down, and goes into this room and that, and waves its hands, but never speaks. And Fanny did see *something* in a scarlet brocade petticoat and *sacque*, and long gloves on ! "

" It must be a very particular ghost to wear gloves. Have any other of the servants seen *it* ? "

" Several have caught sight of it at a little distance, but poor Fanny came full upon it, turning the corner just by the door, and she's been ailing ever since. The housekeeper would have sent her to bed before tea, only she begged and prayed to be let stay downstairs ; she wouldn't mind her headache if only she might keep with the others. But my Lady Rosamund is mortal frightened lest the children should get word of it. Of course it's one of the servants that is masquerading, perhaps more than one. Though it do seem in some ways as if a poor servant-girl could not compass it."

" Have you said anything to Lady Forest, Tarleton ? "

" Not a word. My lady has got irritable nerves, and I wouldn't like to run the risk of upsetting them. I hope we shall soon be going away, though she did say something about the end of January. I don't like living in a haunted house, it's a thing I never could put up with ; there's never no knowing what a ghost may take into its head to do. I've advised the butler to look well after his plate, and I keep a sharp eye, I can promise you, Miss Clare, on the *jewels* under my care. Ghosts are as likely to be light-fingered as not. And if there was one, male *or* female, in Lowndes Square, much as I am attached to you and to my lady, I'd give notice, or even forfeit a month's wages, rather than be bound to keep such shady company."

That evening the party did not break up till nearly midnight, but it was noticed that Miss Haberton was missing

about ten o'clock ; her maid told some one that she had a bad sick headache, and that late hours did not, as a rule, agree with her. It was striking twelve by the stable-clock when Clare found herself once more in her room ; she felt so brave that she left her door unlocked, as Miss Vanderquist had asked her to do, that she might seize her opportunity and slip in unperceived. It was about half-past twelve when Dorothea came ; she was partly dressed, but her dressing-gown was over all, and a small woollen shawl was tied over her head.

"What is all this water for ?" asked Clare, as, at her friend's request, she resumed some of her petticoats.

"I am going to treat the ghost to some of it. I hear it was up and down the corridor last night for more than an hour. I read a little while ago of some brave spirit who flung a heavy glass water-bottle at a ghost and knocked it down. But I don't want to injure *our* ghost, not even to hurt her, but only to *souse* her well, and cure her of her pranks, if possible. Let me see if Jennings has carried out all my orders."

The large ewers were both quite full, though not brimming ; there were several supply cans, and a very large, light jug, also well filled. Miss Vanderquist was satisfied that she was amply supplied with *ammunition*.

"I ask nothing of you but that you will keep me going when the first charge is made," said Dorothea. "I shall look to you for the sinews of war—that is to say, successive jugs of water."

One o'clock struck, and immediately came the rustle that was growing almost familiar. Dorothea at once armed herself for the conflict, and slipped into a recess just opposite Clare's door. Another minute, and slowly and noiselessly came the ghost, the only sound being the rustle of the stiff silk petticoat. Miss Vanderquist at once pounced upon the antique-looking creature, crying, "Now I have you, my Lady Betty ; I have vowed to cure you of haunting this corridor." And she emptied about a gallon of cold water full upon her, while she loudly summoned Clare to her assistance. "Bring more water, Miss Darlington," she exclaimed ; "I am holding Lady Betty. I wonder she

does not disappear, or go off in a flash of brimstone. Make haste ; I am horribly cold and wet."

By this time Clare had entered into the spirit of the thing, and she discharged first one and then another of the full toilet jugs with such excellent effect, that the unlucky ghost got drenched, while she herself escaped almost untouched. Lady Betty screamed—a very recognisable scream—when the first *douche* descended. At the second and third sousing she could only sob and gasp and faintly implore.

" You have had enough," said little Miss Vanderquist at last. " Your ladyship will not disturb us again, I think. Let me escort you to your own room, and I will help you into bed, while Clare gets you a good dose of hot brandy-and-water. I have a bottle of spirits and a boiling kettle all ready for the occasion, also plenty of lump sugar. I think I shall want a little grog myself. Come, Lady Betty. *No*, you shall not escape me. I am not going to have your dangerous illness on my conscience. Having well soaked my ghost externally, I feel it incumbent on me to administer something to prevent her taking a serious cold, before she returns to the *family vault*."

CHAPTER XXI.

A SCION OF NOBILITY.

" Kind hearts are more than coronets."

BUT by this time the household was pretty thoroughly aroused ; servants in promiscuous toilets and guests in harlequin costume began to pour in upon the scene of action ; and presently arrived the master and mistress of The Towers, intent upon investigating the cause of the midnight disturbance. Lady Forest made her appearance in a most *récherché* bedroom costume, and Tarleton, in sad-coloured

raiment and stiff, high-crowned nightcap, followed close upon her heels, guarding with her own jealous hands her lady's jewel-casket.

"Where is the fire?" cried Lady Forest. "Never mind saving anything; let us escape with our lives!"

"There is no fire, thank Heaven!" answered some one in the crowd. "I do believe it is that blessed ghost at its tricks again. It is a dreadful thing to live in a haunted house."

"I believe the ghost is 'laid,'" whispered Clare to Lady Forest; "we shall not be troubled any more. Get the people to go back to their rooms; do your best to cover a general retreat. I will come and tell you all about it, cousin, as soon as I have spoken to Miss Vanderquist."

It had not taken many minutes to make Lady Rosamund understand the catastrophe, and she had flown to interview "Lady Betty," as, in her bedraggled train and drenched brocaded petticoat, she crouched shivering and weeping by her own bedroom fire. Sir Francis, following close upon his wife's footsteps, intruded most ungallantly on his guest's privacy, and comprehending without much difficulty the drama that was being enacted, commenced there and then a judicial inquiry into the strange source of alarm.

But Lady Rosamund, who had had the advantage of a few minutes' private conversation with Miss Vanderquist, made all possible haste to adjourn the examination. "My dear," she said, giving her husband, as she spoke, a private little pinch to enforce the significance of her words, "this can all be explained presently: if we do not make haste, and get this poor soaked Lady Betty to bed, we shall have murder on our consciences. I am afraid Miss Vanderquist, too, would be glad of a dry dressing gown; and my feet are as wet as if I had been walking in the river. Put the best face you can upon it; tell our friends that they had better retire to their own rooms and go to sleep again—if they can. And order off those shrieking servants at once, will you, while Marabout and I attend to Lady Betty?"

"But, my dear, I must *insist*—" began Sir Francis, when his wife interrupted him—"My dear, there must be no public revelations to-night. Go and clear the corridors,

please, while I attend to my duties here ; all mysteries can be unravelled to-morrow morning."

And in about another hour the household had once more composed itself. "Lady Betty," having been well dosed with gruel and sal-volatile, and treated also with hot flannels, and foot-bath, and dry rubbings, was ignominiously consigned to bed, where she lay hysterically sobbing and moaning, a very spectacle of misery. Next day, she was, of course far too unwell to rise—that she had taken a dreadful cold was assumed, and it was agreed on all hands that she had better be nursed in her own room for the remainder of her visit. All was explained to the guests, and to some of the servants ; though much less was said than might have been expected, in order to shield the unhappy offender, who could never hope to show her face again at Chilling Towers. She, however, was not the sole culprit ; one of the servants was implicated and had actually—for reasons of her own—started the scare before the arrival of Miss Haberton.

Sir Francis made very rigid and stern inquiries when once the examination commenced, and the whole affair was thoroughly and impartially investigated, though for the sake of his wife's "distant connection" the *trial*—for such it might be called—was scarcely prosecuted as it would have been had no member of the family been culpable. Miss Haberton terminated her visit within a very few days, and Lady Betty troubled the haunted wing no more. The servants who connived at the disgraceful imposture were summarily dismissed, and tranquillity once more reigned at Chilling Towers ; while the Christmas festivities, which had sustained a sort of check, were with fresh spirit and zest resumed.

On New Year's Eve, the day appointed, appeared his Grace the Duke of Acresworth. Neither Miss Vanderquist nor Miss Darlington was much impressed by his appearance ; he had very little to say for himself, and that little was singularly common-place. There was something, too, gloomy and morose in his manner ; and when he did descend to converse, it was in such imperious and yet ponderous fashion that no one cared for his society. Had

he not been a duke he would certainly have been voted a *bore*, if not a *bear* also ; and in most circles he would almost certainly have been "sent to Coventry." Lady Forest kindly relieved her hostess, as far as was possible, and devoted herself quite sacrificingly to the entertainment of the high-born visitor, but scarcely with her usual success ; she found him so difficult "to get on with," that more than once she was tempted to abandon her designs upon his ducal coronet, and leave him to amuse himself in his own sweet way in the smoke-room, and the billiard-room, and the racquet-court, where, as Lady Rosamund complained, "bad language was certainly allowed."

A whole week passed, and the Duke remained unpopular ; Lady Rosamund was forced to confess that he was not a pleasant guest in a house, and that she was afraid he would be most disagreeable as a partner for life ; while Lady Forest so far assented as to confide to her hostess her reluctance to help on the proposed match in any way.

"I am afraid rumour was right," she said one day, when his Grace of Acresworth was under discussion in the ladies' private council chamber. "It is said that the Duchess died of a broken heart ; and, really, if she had a heart to break, I do think it is possible he might have broken it. I am told, too, on incontestable authority, that he was a very monster of jealousy—a regular *Othello*. He would not even allow his wife to dance round-dances, and she dared not be seen conversing amicably with a male friend ; he was a tyrant."

"So I have heard. People do accuse the poor little Duchess of having been a sad flirt, and it may or may not have been a true bill against her. There was some gossip, I recollect, about a cousin of hers, to whom she had been engaged when she was almost a school-girl, and whom she had been forced by her father to dismiss, when the Duke made his splendid proposals. I am afraid your lovely Clare will never listen to him, should he fancy her."

"He does not seem very much smitten at present, it must be confessed. Still, if he did propose—and he really has signified his intention of speedily marrying again, you know—I should think it my duty to exert all my influence

in his favour. His rent-roll is immense. I am told the family diamonds are something unprecedented ; he has his estates in the south of England and at the Lakes, in the Midlands, in Ireland, in Scotland and in North Wales, to say nothing of a chateau in Normandy, a palazzo or two in Italy, and a grand feudal old schloss somewhere in Germany. Then his coronet ! There must be a wonderful charm in being called ‘Your Grace’ ! ”

“ The Duke is a great match, no doubt, Clare,” said Lady Rosamund, with a grave seriousness unusual to her ; “ but the advantages which an alliance with him undoubtedly offers may be, I am afraid, *too* dearly purchased. No woman, especially a young and beautiful one, could ever hope to be happy with him. And happiness is not to be left entirely out of the question.” .

“ But there are so many roads to happiness, Rosamund ; and Clare, I believe, is a sensible girl, with very little nonsense about her. That poor simple Duchess had no sort of backbone in her character, from all I can learn about her ; she always had her regrets, I fancy, for the love in a cottage she had been forced to relinquish. She was a woman of no brilliance, no wit, no *savoir faire*, and of very little beauty. In short, she had no strength of mind, she was too meek, too docile, too subservient altogether ; these profoundly obedient wives make terrible tyrants of their husbands. She might have managed him, but she never tried ; she was a poor, listless, spiritless, milk-and-water thing, who ought to have married a good-humoured country squire, or a quiet, respectable gentleman-farmer. She would have headed his table decently, kept her maids in order, and brought up her children irreproachably ; she would have accomplished her destiny and been a happy and estimable woman. She was meant for a squiress, or well-to-do farmeress—never for a duchess.”

“ There is something in what you say, Clare ; so much of life’s success depends upon one’s qualifications for the post one fills. Still, I am very glad to think my little girls are safe in the nursery, and far out of his Grace’s ken. I should not be tempted, *I trust*, to sacrifice one of them, were it otherwise ; but there is no knowing till one is *tried*. It

would sound so well to speak of my daughter, the Duchess ! —only Francis would never listen to anything of the kind ; he believes implicitly in true love, and contemplates with scorn a union that is not founded on affection. Ours was a real love-match. You may smile, Clare, but I was enough of a milkmaid to be in love in my girlish days, and I am in love with my husband *still*."

" And quite right, too, my dear ; you are one of the especially fortunate ones ; it must be so pleasant to be in love with your husband, though some people might find it a little uninteresting. But love is a luxury reserved for the few ; a portionless girl like my Clare can scarcely expect to indulge her fancies in this respect. It is all very well for you, Rosamund, so satisfactorily established, and with an affectionate husband into the bargain, to talk sentimentally about love, but on the whole that sort of thing does not answer. I should not like Clare to be listening to you at this moment, for though she is, as I just observed, a sensible girl, with less than the average amount of girlish nonsense about her, she is not entirely dependable. Those Abbey Mill people put some very strange ideas into her head, and her own father had some of the oddest notions, and did *not* bring her up in the way a young lady ought to go. If I had educated her myself it would have been altogether different ; she would have been carefully trained in the habits and tone of society, and she would have understood her duties. As things are, I am far from feeling implicit confidence in her ; it is quite upon the cards that she may coolly and determinately reject the Duke, should he propose the honour of an alliance."

" And can you wonder ? Could you blame her if she preferred some one not quite such an ogre—not quite so elderly—not quite so overbearing, so prosy, so intolerably selfish ? Why, you confessed, not half-an-hour ago, Clare Forest, that you were reluctant to throw your influence into the scale ! "

" And so I am reluctant—strangely reluctant ; for the man really has something of the *ogre* about him, and I know there are *on dits* whispered in the best circles that reflect very seriously upon his reputation. But then

gossip and rumour are never to be relied on, and I detest scandal. Still the fact remains that there are one or two honourable matrons who will not receive him, wealthy and noble though he be."

"I really think if I were you, Clare, I would not do anything to forward the match ; the girl is far too good to be wasted on an old curmudgeon, and he is *that*, if he be not an old profligate. Take my advice, though you are so many years my senior, and I have far less experience of the world's ways than yourself ;—listen to the warning voice that bids you leave meddling alone ; let events take their course ; you might help on the match, no doubt, but then you might bitterly repent it—*how* bitterly, one scarcely dares to imagine."

"Well, I think I will not interfere, nor, at the same time, will I hinder, or try to hinder, whatever may betide. The young people, if we may call them so, are thrown together ; let that suffice."

"If I had known all that I know now, they never would have been thrown together at Chilling Towers. Francis is already hoping that the Duke will not prolong his visit, and he is quite inclined to blame me for asking him to our house. I have no fears for Dorothy Vanderquist, she would infinitely prefer death or exile to becoming the Duchess of Acresworth ; but I have my fears for Clare Darlington. And if this most ill-assorted marriage should come about, I shall always feel that I had a hand in the matter, and I shall find it extremely difficult to forgive myself."

"Of course, Dorothea Vanderquist need not marry at all ; if I had been a great heiress, I should never have troubled myself with marriage vows. For I had *my* vision of love, and bliss, and roses, and honey-dew in the days of my girlhood, Rosamund—and who has not? But it could not be—it could not be! Though, God knows, I might have been a better woman if I had not subscribed to the creed which teaches that love flies out of the window when poverty comes in at the door. Yes, I might—I should have been, at least, a *happier* woman, I think ; but the past cannot be recalled, and regret is vain. I have only

one favour to ask of you, Lady Rosamund ; if the Duke is at all *épris*, do not prejudice Clare against him."

"I think I *may* promise you so much, though I am afraid I should feel very much as if I had betrayed a lamb to the butcher if I let any girl ignorantly pledge her troth to that man. Every day and every hour deepens my feelings against him ; I only wonder the Duchess lived so long."

But the weather changed, and the Duke, whom no one favoured in the house, became more tolerable in the hunting-field. An occasional oath *there* did not sound so loud, or so coarse ; and in riding across country one is too much occupied in taking hedges and ditches, and following the hounds, to trouble oneself very much about one's neighbour's temper. The Duke was a mighty hunter, many trophies of the field were his, and he was almost always "in at the death."

Clare, and most of the young ladies staying with Lady Rosamund, rode to the meet, and one or two of them followed the hounds. Clare one day was "in at the death," and was rewarded by the present of the fox's brush, the Duke himself being the presenter. But it so happened that day that the dogs, having had a hard run, tore the hapless fox to pieces, and Clare, though no fine lady, turned very sick, and almost swooned upon the spot.

It happened, too, that evening that Clare, having ridden rather too far and too fast, was a little indisposed ; she begged to remain in her own room, as she could not possibly eat any dinner ; she would, if at all revived, join the ladies in the drawing-room. And Lady Forest assented, promising to convey her apologies to their hostess, though she felt slightly annoyed, for the Duke had that very day broadly declared his admiration of Miss Darlington.

"The finest woman he had seen these twenty years !" he averred, with an expletive that was as much of an oath as he dared utter in a lady's presence ; and "the best horsewoman, with a perfect seat, and the most perfect nerves !" He did not know when he had met "such a perfectly beautiful, spirited creature ;" though whether he referred to Clare herself, or to the high-bred mare she rode, it was

impossible to say. Lady Forest reported the compliment, as paid, to Clare.

"It is such a pity you cannot go down to-night," said her ladyship, as she drew on her gloves. "I should advise some strong green tea and toast; champagne is always doubtful in a case like this. I have known a little bottle of the very best *Clicquot* act as a sudden and almost miraculous 'pick-me-up'; but then, on the contrary, it sometimes induces sick-headache; it is a sort of 'kill or cure' recipe, my dear, so I think, if I were you, I would decide upon the tea and toast. It would be such a pity to lose the whole evening; the Duke wants you to give him a song to-night, I know. I will tell Tarleton to look well after you, and mind you rest sufficiently."

The tea and toast in due time appeared; but when it was finished, and Tarleton came to know if she should put out Miss Darlington's dress, Clare felt quite too comfortable to rouse herself to make the necessary toilet.

"No," she said, lazily, "it is so nice here, and so quiet, and my bones really do ache. I think I will not trouble you this evening, Tarleton; it is the first holiday I have taken for a long time. I shall be all right in the morning, if I rest now."

And so it came to pass that Clare spent the remainder of the evening in her own room—the sofa drawn up to the fire, and her table well supplied with the light literature of the season. But she grew weary of her self-imposed banishment as the hours wore away, she was so dull. She was half resolving to undress and go to bed when Miss Vanderquist came in to inquire after her headache.

"I did not miss you, dear, till dinner was half over," said Dorothea; "and then Lady Forest informed me that you had a headache, and were otherwise suffering from your imprudence in having ridden too far. She hoped to find you in the drawing-room, she said, but when we went there—unusually late, too—you had not made your appearance. She sat down, according to custom, at the whist-table, and she will not leave it, as we very well know, till midnight, at the earliest, so I thought I would come myself and see how you fared. Of course they sent you up some dinner?"

"I have had all I wanted, thank you ; I can never make anything of a meal when I am over-tired. Besides, I saw poor Reynard despatched, and that certainly made me sick."

"I do not wonder ; it must be a horrible sight."

"One I will never willingly see again ; I will take care in future not to leave the field behind, as I did to-day. I like riding, I am passionately fond of it, when I am well mounted, as I am here ; but I begin to think hunting is a rather un-womanly amusement."

"And *I* think it *unmanly*."

"Dorothea, what can you mean ?"

"Just what I say, dear ; there is something, to my mind, excessively repulsive—nay, demoralising—in hunting."

"As how ? Foxes *must* be killed, you know ; they have no hesitation in helping themselves to the farmers' fat geese and turkeys."

"Certainly foxes must be killed ; but that is no reason why they should be *hunted* to death, I know. Clare, mine are most unpopular sentiments, and if I had proclaimed them to-day on the lawn when you were all just ready to mount, I dare say I should have been laughed at, perhaps covertly hissed, for my pains. And yet, if occasion demand, I hope I shall never conceal my true opinion."

"You seem to imply that hunting is cruel and wicked ?"

"And can you convince me that it is otherwise ? Do you suppose God approves it ?"

"Well, that is putting it very strongly. But all sorts of animals have to die on our account ; why not foxes as well as sheep and oxen ?"

"Clare, I am afraid that as a Christian nation we are sadly guilty before God in this respect. The animals are given to us for food, and their skins for clothing, but it behoves us to spare them all possible suffering. The butcher's calling need not be the brutal thing it is, I am persuaded. Some day there will be a grand reformation in this respect, and God's creatures will be put to death more mercifully. Vermin will always have to be exterminated ; but man will know better than to find 'his pleasure, or his pride, in sorrow of the meanest thing that feels.'"

" You do not approve of hare-hunting, of course ? "

" Certainly not. Game must be kept down, or all our standing crops will be devoured ; but what is called *coursing* is in my eyes a sin and a shame."

" But, Dorothea, surely there must be some apology for '*sport*' ? "

" Real sport needs no apology. Let a man be as good a marksman as he can ; let him be a dead shot if he shoots at all ; but to my mind what is now called 'sport' is unmanly, and tends to blunt and coarsen the finer instincts of the race. What can be more cowardly than to attack a defenceless creature at such odds—men, horses, dogs, all leagued against one poor frightened hare ; or perhaps, as it was to-day, an unfortunate fox, who has scarcely a chance for his life ? "

" But the horses and the dogs like it as well as the men ? "

" Doubtless ; and I have heard it solemnly affirmed that the fox likes it too, though on that count I must beg leave to differ. The timid little hare certainly does *not* like it ; the most enthusiastic hunter cannot pretend to say that she does. And the hapless stag, who is hunted over and over again, cannot be expected to enjoy the exercise. As to the *necessity* of fox-hunting, I am told that foxes are getting scarce, and that the creature we pretend to pursue as a duty to society is very often *bred* for the express purposes of sport. Clare, dear, it cannot be manly, it cannot be womanly, it cannot be *right* to find amusement in the torture and terror of these creatures whom God has given to us for lawful uses. Think of that unhappy Reynard to-day, driven from his covert, pursued by dogs for miles, rendered desperate as strength failed him, and the shouts and the barks came nearer and nearer ; and then, at last, dying in mortal agony in the fangs of his cruel enemy. He was literally torn to pieces, the Duke exultingly said ; it was with the greatest difficulty he saved the brush—*for you.*"

" Don't speak of it ; I will never see it again. It makes me shudder and turn faint even now. Yes, it must be very cruel, and I am ashamed of myself for being there. But,

Dolly, ought we always to be thinking how *God* views our common actions?"

"Ought we not to set the Lord before us at all times? Was that fox to-day killed for the glory of God?"

"I suppose not."

"It was not killed for the good of man, for as vermin it could have been simply shot. If the gentlemen must find their pleasure in killing and hunting the brute creation, let them go out to India, and kill tigers and lions, or whatever else it is a service to mankind to destroy. One cannot exactly respect the British sportsman, who takes good care to incur no real danger—unless, indeed, he takes foolhardy leaps, and, as not infrequently happens, rushes, as unsummoned as a suicide, into eternity."

CHAPTER XXII.

CLARE'S CUP OF BITTERNESS IS PRETTY FULL.

"I have not that alacrity of spirit
Nor cheer of mind, that I was wont to have."

C LARE and her patroness lingered at Chilling Towers till the beginning of February, and the Duke, though on the whole "particular in his attentions," did not formally propose. The truth was, that Clare played quite an ingenious little game of avoidance, for it struck her that she would be in dire disgrace whenever she actually declined the honour of the ducal coronet; and as she did not want to quarrel with her cousin, she put off the evil day continually, in the hope that something would happen to obviate the painful necessity of openly despising strawberry leaves.

For no other thought was in her mind; *coute qui coute*, she would firmly refuse to become the Duchess of Acresworth; nothing should tempt her to listen favourably to this

man's suit—her only hope was that she might evade it altogether, that his patience might evaporate in the very weariness of baffled pursuit. To her great delight he went away, bent on the persecution of stags and foxes, before the year was quite one month old, and she hoped that the hour of danger had passed over; for surely he did not care enough to remain faithful to the impressions he had received when absence should dissolve the spell.

'She was sorry to leave Chilling Towers herself, for Lady Rosamund had been very kind to her—increasingly so since the Duke's persecutions had become apparent; and Sir Francis had from the first treated her with all the consideration due to his own kinswoman. Miss Vanderquist left rather suddenly, being summoned to the sick bed of an old friend; the Captain was due at another country-house three hundred miles away from Chalkshire; and the curate reluctantly obeyed the peremptory call, which reproached him for long neglect of duty. Lady Forest and Clare were the last of the Christmas guests; and the day came when they, too, were fain to bid adieu to host and hostess, and turn their faces Londonwards.

It must be confessed that Clare had been a little spoilt during the last few months; she had enjoyed certain privileges and immunities such as had never before been accorded to any of my lady's favourites; she had been permitted to speak her mind with little reserve, and she had even been encouraged in certain caprices and imperious airs, to the great amazement of the household in Lowndes-square.

But now her experiences were fated to undergo an alteration; a change, and by no means a desirable one, was to come "o'er the spirit of her dream." So far from speaking her mind with impunity, or giving her opinion, asked or unasked, without reservation, she suddenly found herself always and altogether in the wrong. Everything she said was contradicted; everything she did was censured; there was ceaseless guerilla warfare between herself and her estranged patroness. The "Cousin Forest" who had petted and pampered and made much of her favourite of the hour, was gone—gone utterly and passed out of existence, as it seemed to poor bewildered Clare; whilst the tyrannical

shrewish Lady Forest, against whom Miss Argles had once protested, took her place.

At first Clare was confounded ; she hoped that the mood would pass, that the fit of bad temper would disappear ; she went to bed every night thankful that the day's trials were over, and hoping for a happier state of things on the morrow. But morning after morning dispelled the fond illusion ; her ladyship grew daily more irritable, more sullen, more difficult to please. And, being in an altogether impracticable frame of mind, she kept *Lent* this year penitently enough, to the no small discomfiture of her unfortunate household. The servants grumbled among themselves, and threatened "not to put up with it" ; but they could indemnify themselves in many ways, and take care that a *jour maigre* should not be quite compulsory ; and gossip and hilarity was not to be banished from the second table.

Clare had no redress ; she was *required* to attend "divine service" on Wednesdays and Fridays, and to keep a sort of fast once a week. She had to read a "homily" aloud every morning, directly after breakfast ; and, when once she made a rejoinder that certainly might be termed "an impertinence," she was grimly bidden to take up "The Whole Duty of Man," and study it closely for the remainder of that day. And yet all this might have been borne had the long evenings been less intolerable. Lady Forest was one of those people who cannot live without some sort of dissipation, and if she abstained from the ball and the theatre she would not on any persuasion forego her *cards*. Oh, those weary, weary evenings ! Oh, that senseless, senseless *bézique*, that never seemed to come to an end ! How in those days Clare came to hate the sight of cards, for hour after hour she was constrained to declare royal marriages on pasteboard, till her eyes grew dim and her head ached, and the silver-toned chime of the bell-clock told midnight.

Nor was this the worst, for she was all the time the butt of my lady's waspish temper. Nothing pleased her ; nothing satisfied her. If she lost her game she was seriously annoyed, and if *very* cross indeed—by no means an unusual occurrence—she would even hint at possible "*cheating*." If she won, and for peace sake she might have won always,

she complained that Clare made mistakes on purpose, and played her cards thoughtlessly. "There was no interest in playing with an animated dummy half-asleep, scarcely knowing a king from a queen, or an ace from a diamond."

One evening, just as she was beginning to think she could bear it no longer, and was on the point of throwing down the cards and refusing another deal,—one of Lady Forest's most particular and confidential friends made her appearance, and Clare had the supreme satisfaction of being dismissed somewhat peremptorily. A little while ago she would have resented the being sent away like a child, that the elder ladies might hold their palaver; now she was only too thankful to escape. She hastened to her room, stirred her fire into a cheerful blaze, sat down in her comfortable easy chair, and gave way to unrestrained weeping. It was not often she so indulged in tears, for she heartily despised crying; but just now she could not repress her long-tried feelings—her cup was full, and overflowed.

She had not been there very long when she was aware of a presence in the room; she had forgotten to lock the door, and some one had entered without knocking. It was only Tarleton, who did sometimes dispense with the usual ceremony; and she had come on no unkindly errand, she was really very sorry for Miss Darlington, and as she passed along the gallery she had heard her sobs, and made up her mind there and then to offer such poor consolation as in her lay.

"I am very silly, I know, Tarleton," said Clare, as she wiped her swollen eyes; "but I have had a bad, nervous headache all day; this chilly weather does not suit me. There; I feel relieved already. What is it, Tarleton?"

"I don't want anything particular, Miss Darlington," replied the waiting woman, "I only just want a word with you on the quiet. I'd like to say, *Never you mind, my lady*, she's always the same, and nobody can put up with her if they take her tantrums and vagaries to heart. You've had an uncommon long spell of fine weather, and we've all downstairs wondered when the wind would change; for change it was sure to, sooner or later. And change it has; the sunshine and warmth are gone as if they'd never been,

and there's nothing but cloud and storm instead. If I was you, Miss Clare, I'd make up my mind one way or t'other. I'd just grin and abide by it as I do, letting her grumble and scold, and find fault till she has no more breath. Deary me, her sharpness and crankiness is no more to me than water on a duck's back—I'm used to it. It don't hurt me. But if you can't prevail on yourself to take it, as Mr. Weller says, '*philosophic* like,' you'd better tell her you *won't* put up with it any longer, and you're going away where she *won't* vex you any more."

"I have thought of that, Tarleton ; I have thought of it very seriously of late ; but I thought, perhaps, Lady Forest was not very well, and felt inclined to quarrel with things generally, and I hoped the cloud would pass away, and all be as it was before. So many people have *moods*, you know."

"Yes, but not moods like hers, Miss Darlington. Haven't you found out yet that my lady takes fancies—that she has her *favourites*, who can do no wrong while the favour lasts, nor do any right when once she sets herself against them. And when she has once discarded a pet, shown her teeth and her claws, as I may say, she never takes to it again. She'll never be good to you again, ma'am, so don't flatter yourself; if you stop here till you're fifty, she'll be ugly to the end ; unless——"

"Unless what, Tarleton ?"

"May I speak plain, Miss Darlington ? May I say what it doesn't, perhaps, become me to say, but what I *know* is at the bottom of all this upset ?"

"Say what you will—I am not easily offended, especially if people *mean* kindness."

"Then it's all about this here *Dook*. You've given him the cold shoulder, she maintains ; and she was set heart and soul upon your making *the match of the season*. She's tired of you as a fancy, there's no gainsaying it ; she is tired as another lady might be tired of a parrot, or a lap-dog, or even a foundling. It's her way, and I don't think she can help it. But, if she saw that you weren't bent on defeating her plans ; if she thought she saw the probability of a grand wedding by-and-by, I do think she'd come round, and cosset you up,

and make more of you than ever. And of course a Dook is a Dook ! Couldn't you, now, Miss Darlington, frame your mind to taking him ? You'd soon whistle him back again I'll be bound. He'd ought to know that a young lady's 'no' may be unsaid ; he shouldn't expect such a beauty as you are to tumble into his hands like an over-ripe apple."

" You seem to know all about it, Tarleton ; but the Duke never proposed. I have not refused him."

" No, that's it ; he'll never propose now, my lady says ; you've given him the cold shoulder too long. You've shown him that you don't want him for a lover. I heard her tell old Mrs. Davey the other day that you treated him as if he were any common person ; you made no more account of him than if he had been a shopkeeper."

" I am not sure that I might not have preferred some shopkeepers to the Duke of Acresworth. If manners make the gentleman, I do think the shopkeepers, whoever they may be, would sometimes have the advantage. No, Tarleton, I do not like the Duke of Acresworth, and I do not mean to marry him."

" And yet, Miss Clare, there be hundreds of young ladies more highly born, if you'll excuse my saying so, than you are—though, perhaps, not quite so handsome—who would give their eyes, almost, to have your chances. I've seen something of life, and I know a little of how things go on in what you may call the tip-top circles. Husbands and wives of real rank—such as dukes and duchesses—don't see very much of each other ; they have their own sets of apartments, and their own friends, and faithful servants ; and they go their separate ways, and don't think it '*comme ill fo*,' as the French say, to interfere with each other's plans, or to *clash* in the slightest degree."

" Well, I think if I had a husband, I should like to see a good deal of him, and I should like us both to go one way. What is the use of being married if you are still to lead your own solitary life ? "

" A good deal of use, Miss Clare, if you are to be a *duchess*. You would have more money than you would know how to spend ; you would have troops of servants to

wait upon your commands, and ever so many grand houses, and parks, and carriages ; and you might dress like the Queen, and pay ready money for everything. Now, there are some poor ladies that have to scheme and scheme for every new costume they require, and they are slaves to their dressmakers, if not to their own maids, because they can never manage to pay up as they ought to do. Now, that would never be your case if you consented to be Duchess of Acresworth. It's worth thinking over *more* than once ; indeed, and it is, Miss Darlington."

" Tarleton," said Clare, turning round suddenly, so as to face the waiting woman ; " has Lady Forest given you your cue ? I mean, has she instructed you what to say to me on this subject ? "

Tarleton coloured, and looked slightly injured, but after a moment's hesitation, she replied, " Well, ma'am, I cannot say my lady has said *nothing* about your affairs, because that wouldn't be quite the truth. She told me, if I had a chance I might as well put in a word, just to let you see what a splendid opportunity you were throwing away. She didn't give me any particular instructions ; she left it all to my own judgment and discretion. But when I see for myself how unhappy you were, and knowed that things would never be any better, but *worse*, so long as you set my lady's will at defiance, I thought, for your own sake, I did ought to say what I could ; for I'm sure the Dook could be brought back again with half a hint ; and if he came, and you accepted him, you would never have any more vexation. My lady wouldn't presume to snub you as she is always doing now. '*Her Grace*' could do no wrong, for certain. Now, do think it over, there's a dear young lady, and I give you this good advice for your own dear sake—I do, indeed, ma'am. Deary me, I wish I was a lady, and had such a face as yours—so many fine things, such monstrous good luck, should never go a-begging. Now don't look like that, Miss Darlington ; why should you be offended with me ? I am sure I speak out of kindness, and with all respect."

" I am sure you do, Tarleton, and I thank you very much for the interest you take in me ; but I would do almost anything else—*anything* else in reason if not out of reason—to

please my cousin, except marry the Duke of Acresworth. Why, you have seen him, and heard him speak yourself, and you know the sort of man he is said to be."

" Well, Miss Clare, I cannot say I admire him at all. He wouldn't be my sort of gentleman, if so be that I was his equal, and had a right to tell him so ; I am afraid I could not put up with him, if I tried ever so. If a *Dook* can be vulgar, I should say he's *vulgar*. His valet told Mr. Weller that he swears like a trooper, which we know to be a fact ; and he drinks more than enough continually, and he takes liberties with the maids ; he chuckles the young ones under the chin, and pays them what he thinks are compliments, and calls them 'my dear,' and all that sort of thing, you know, ma'am."

" And you can tell me all this, Tarleton, and yet urge me to marry him ? A husband who drank too much, and swore, and behaved rudely to pretty waiting maids, would not suit me at all. I should despise him and hate him ; I could not help myself. No, I will not purchase rank, and wealth, and distinction at such an awful price. I cannot quite understand *you*, Tarleton. One minute you advise—almost implore—me to meet my cousin's wishes ; the next, you speak so ill of the Duke, that you can scarcely expect me, as a commonly decent young woman, to think of him with toleration."

" It's just this, Miss Clare. I do think it is a pity yon should marry such an ugly, cross-grained profligate, when you might really do so much better in another way ; but there's my promise to my lady to say a word in season, like, if you would give me the opportunity. And I've said it, ma'am, haven't I ? I've cried up the *Dook*, and all the advantages of being his duchess ; and I hope, if my name comes up between you and my lady, you'll own as much."

" That I will, Tarleton, you may be sure. I will not give the least hint of your sometimes taking the other side of the question. I will give Lady Forest to understand that you have nobly done your duty ; and, that being settled, please say no more. If I am foolish, let me be foolish ; I cannot, for all the coronets in Christendom, become Duchess of Acresworth."

"Well, Miss Clare, I can't blame you ; that is, I can't *between ourselves*. I wouldn't do it myself, if I was in your shoes ; but then waiting-maids must not judge for ladies born and bred. There's one more thing I'd like to say—just one little question I'd like to put, Miss Darlington, if I was quite sure I shouldn't be presuming *too far*? I hope I know my place, ma'am."

"I am sure you do, Tarleton. But what is it you wish to ask? I dare say I shall not object to answer you, for I have scarcely a secret in the world ; *only*, I must know first whether you are asking for your own information simply, or for Lady Forest's."

"For my own, ma'am. My lady has nothing, and shall have nothing to do with this conversation, once I have done her bidding, delivered her *message*, as I may say. What I want to know, Miss Darlington, is—whether there is *any one else*?"

"Any one else? I don't exactly understand."

"Then if you don't, ma'am, I'm answered. I meant, was there anybody you *favoured*?—anybody who is your own true love, for whose sake you would face poverty, and loneliness, and disgrace?"

"Be easy, Tarleton; I have not any 'true love' for whom I would face poverty and loneliness. As for *disgrace*, I am quite sure the man does not live, for whom I would encounter any kind of dishonour. But do not think me better than I am, for I confess to you, that I shrink not only from actual poverty, but from a circumscribed income. I am not one of the proud and virtuous young women, who can defy fate to do its worst. Not I! I like luxury and plenty of money. I like dress, I like jewels, I like gaiety, and what the world calls dissipation ; I like to be admired—I should like to be *worshipped*, even ; I should be delighted to accept broad lands and high position and even the ducal coronet, if the Duke himself could be excluded from the bargain. I want a lover after my own heart, not the Duke of Acresworth, but some one with all the Duke's pecuniary and other temporal surroundings."

"Then I am afraid, Miss Clare, dear, you'll have to want. You'll be obliged to moderate your desires, or be

an old maid. One cannot have everything in this world."

"I know that, Tarleton, and I do not expect everything. As for being an old maid, I do not care a jot. If I had plenty of money, and had rank and position, I should—at least, I am almost sure I should—*prefer* what is called—'single blessedness.'"

"And you are right, Miss Clare—quite right! There's nothing like your liberty, and plenty of money to spend for your enjoyment. Most women marry for money, *or* standing—what Mr. Weller calls '*status*.' Some do marry for love, and they're disappointed; for men are never to be trusted. They cannot be constant, not even if they try—it isn't in their nature. They are always with 'one foot on sea and one foot on shore,' as the old song says, to the end of the chapter. Never fall in love, Miss Clare, or you'll get your poor heart broken, however good the man may be. After all, I don't know but what my lady is in the right—*she* married for money and grandeur, you know. If she'd kept poor Miss Clare Darlington, as you are now, she'd have been—*nobody*. You're sure of something for your money, and something substantial, too, if you marry to *better* yourself in the eyes of the world."

And with this enunciation of sentiment, Tarleton took her departure. She was sincerely sorry for Clare, and pitied her for being at the mercy of Lady Forest's spiteful temper; but though the proposed match might be in every way a most unequal one, it did seem a pity, she thought, to let such a magnificent fortune slip through one's fingers. She had had some notion, too, of transferring her services to Miss Darlington when she married, for she was heartily tired of Lady Forest's tempers and caprices, and she was by no means certain that Mr. Weller really meant to propose, though he had spoken more than once pretty plainly of a happy time to come when he and she would preside over a high-class greengrocer's establishment at the West End, or else over a "Grand Hotel" at some fashionable sea-side resort. It would be better, after all, to be the Duchess's "own woman," with a good salary, and perquisites, and subordinates at command; especially, if she got to know all

her Grace's *secrets*. Tarleton had missed her chances in her youth, and had been "disappointed" into the bargain. She was fifty now, or thereabouts ; and what woman of her age, comfortably situated, could be supposed to care very much about matrimony ?

Clare did not go down again that night ; her head ached, her eyes were red and swollen, and she was reckless as to consequences. Lady Forest might evince displeasure, or she might not. One scolding or snubbing, more or less, could not signify.

As it happened, the confidential friend stayed on, and partook of a charming *petit souper* of scalloped oysters and other seasonable dainties. It was quite the proper thing to eat shell-fish in *Lent*. The Bishop's wife had made herself ill, and suffered from serious "gastric disturbance," through over-indulgence in stewed halibut, curried prawns, and lobster salad. With such a precedent, one might surely enjoy a modest meal of scalloped oysters, and a bottle of *Roederer*.

And as it happened, Clare's absence without leave provoked neither censure nor comment. Tarleton, when she presided at her ladyship's *couchée*, being questioned—or, as she said herself, "pumped"—gave her own version of the conversation. "If I was you, my lady," she concluded, "I wouldn't be too hard upon Miss Clare ; for she's one of them, I should say, as may be led, but can't be drove. If she's made uncomfortable, like, about his Grace of Acresworth, she'll get to hate his very name. I've had a good deal of experience with young maids of quality, my lady, and I know it doesn't answer to push them too hard. And Miss Darlington *is* a beauty, and no mistake. She's fit to be a princess, I say ; no match can be above her merits. She owned to me, she *hated* poverty, and low-life, and dulness ; but she seems to think all the advantages offered her would be too dearly purchased by marrying the *Dook*. And he is old for her, it must be confessed, and anything but nice-looking. And they do say, my lady, as he worried the late Duchess into her grave. But I think, perhaps—mind I don't say, for certain—Miss Darlington might come round, and be bidable, if she was properly—that is to say, *very gently treated*."

CHAPTER XXIII.

ONE MORE CHANCE.

"Things at the worst will cease, or else climb upward
To what they were before."

IT may happen on occasion that the counsels of a highly respectable, middle-aged waiting-woman are worthy of consideration. Lady Forest was not an altogether injudicious personage : nor was she above taking a hint from an inferior, provided it were offered with all due respect and deference.

When Tarleton left her that night to her own reflections, she began to think that she had been a little too hasty. She could not but own to herself, at least, that she had been rather testy and impatient with her *protégée*, and Clare, who had the spirit of a true Darlington, was certainly not a young woman to be driven into matrimony. And Lady Forest had been indiscreet enough to boast, in a half *sub-rosa* sort of fashion, of the wonderful success of her beautiful young cousin ; of her coming triumphs in the fashionable world ; and especially of the brilliant engagement she was on the point of making. And it would be too humiliating to have to confess that there had been a little mistake ; that *she*—a person famed for sagacious judgments—should have committed the vulgar blunder of counting her chickens before they were hatched.

But it was not yet too late to retrieve an error, she complacently assured herself ; a great deal might be done by judicious *suasion*. She saw now how foolishly she had acted, how she had been betrayed into fits of temper, how much she had done to alienate this girl from whom she expected such triumphant satisfaction. True, she was extremely provoking, irritating, and exasperating to the last degree ; she was worse, she was profoundly *ungrateful*—for she must know how intensely it was desired that she should make this splendid marriage.

Then she thought of her own auriferous wedding ; of the sacrifice of *her* tastes and feelings, and even of her preferences, when, after solemn deliberation, she had at last resolved to ally herself to wealth and grandeur of a certain sort. Sir Raymond Forest was not a man of good birth ; he was an alderman and "something in the City," not at all a good match in point of family for a *Darlington*. She always owned to that ; she had—provided you looked on the meanest side of the shield—made an undoubted *mésalliance*.

But then there were always two sides to be considered, and the Miss Clare Darlington of that day was no heiress ; she had indeed no *dot* at all worth mentioning. And Mr. Alderman Forest—as he then was called—was *rich*, very rich indeed, more so than was at all suspected, and he promised the most satisfactory settlements, without which, of course, Miss Darlington would not have stirred a foot's pace towards the altar. Mr. Forest had married once, in the days of his youth, and his bride had been a buxom young woman of his own standing, who thought she was making quite a wealthy marriage when she plighted her troth to a sturdy youth, who was earning his thirty shillings a week regularly, and had a nice little eight-roomed house, well furnished, in one of the pleasantest suburbs. She married to good furniture, and "a girl" of her own, she assured her friends ; which was next best to marrying to a "four-wheel and a pony ;" almost the same thing as marrying "to a barrow" would have been in a lower grade of life.

And Mr. and Mrs. Forest prospered, and were happy ; children were born to them, though unfortunately none of these survived infancy, being of delicate constitutions, and perhaps not too wisely reared ; for the mother—a good and devoted one in her way—believed firmly in plenty of physic in Godfrey's cordial and Daffy's elixir for teething, as did young women of her class in those dead days, under the old Tory Government. She had a great horror, too, of fresh air and of cold water, so that her puny babies never had the advantages of a bath, or of thoroughly ventilated rooms ; and they died, one after another, to the unspeakable grief of their parents, the eldest being under five years old. Last of

all the mother died also, and Thomas Raymond Forest was a childless widower of fifty, or thereabouts.

For some years he was inconsolable, and thought only of his Patty and her dead offspring lying under the walls of a certain city church, in a "family grave," which he had purchased when the first child died. But after about ten years' solitude he began to think of a second wife, and he asked one of his richest and most ambitious friends, a Mr. Deputy Something, to recommend him to a young lady who should be a *real* lady, and know how to play the piano, and talk French, and work on canvas, in tent-stitch and cross-stitch, as was the fashion of that period.

For during these years, in which he had never dreamed of a lavish expenditure, he had grown to be a wealthy man, and he had bought a spacious, well-built house—a "mansion" the agent called it—and he had furnished it, as he was assured it ought to be furnished, and he had hired men-servants and women-servants, and set up his carriage and pair, and become altogether a "citizen of renown." All he wanted now was a lady of presence, still young, but not *too* juvenile, who would head his table becomingly and look well behind his gallant greys.

It so happened—it does not matter *how*—that he fell in with Miss Clare Darlington, of Chilling Towers, in Cheshire; she was visiting an old schoolfellow at Kensington, and she wanted very much to make a good, that is to say, a *wealthy* match. She was a fine, handsome girl, accomplished and clever, and she was descended from William the Conqueror, or Harold the Dauntless, or some other historical or mythical personage.

She stipulated for one or two things,—substantial "settlements," *of course*; a residence in May-Fair, furnished to her own taste, and some diamonds that might take rank as "family jewels." There was yet one more condition on which she insisted; her betrothed was something "in the tallow way;" nothing so vulgar as a tallow-chandler, you may be sure; but still, something very suspicious in that line; and certain messuages and tenements and *works*, out at Bermondsey, had to be disposed of.

He had no objection—he was tired of grease and the

odour of it ; the business was a good one and was easily disposed of ; and he transferred his interest outwardly to shares, and bonds, and securities, and things more genteel than tallows and oils, though long afterwards it came out, through his solicitor, that he was all the time so faithful to his old love as to keep on one little retail branch, under a borrowed name, where moulds and mutton-dips, and long sixteens, still held their own, and flourished.

Meanwhile, however, the alderman became a knight ; and, dropping the "Thomas," which his godfathers and his godmothers—if he ever had any—had been so unthinking as to call him, figured in society as "Sir Raymond Forest." He would have "passed the chair" in five or six more years, if only he had kept alive, and then Lady Forest would have been my *Lady Mayoress*. The loss of this honour, however, caused her but small regret ; the less that was known about her City connections the better, especially as she found herself, on the proving of Sir Raymond's will, a far richer woman than she had ever anticipated being. And, as he had no relations in the world, so far as he knew, and Clare had been a satisfactory and not too exacting wife, he bequeathed to her, *unconditionally*, every shilling and every atom of property of which he died possessed.

She wore the deepest sables, and secluded herself in the most orthodox fashion, while she superintended the erection of an elaborate monument, yclept a "mausoleum," in Kensal Green Cemetery. Then she did that which seemed best and wisest in her own eyes ; people talked about her very handsome *jointure*, but no one—not even her closest and most intimate friends—really knew how independently wealthy she was. She spent her money freely, some said "lavishly ;" but on the whole she was never accused of extravagance or of ostentation. And, as she had already informed her recusant young cousin, she was a richer woman than was at all supposed ; every penny of her large income was entirely at her own disposal, and she could leave it to those whom she chose to be her heirs, or to the Foundling Hospital, or to a *lunatic asylum*, which, perhaps, would after all be the simplest and most satisfactory solution of her difficulty.

Now all these memories passed before her as she pressed her downy pillow, and thought of this second Clare Darlington, who had within her grasp a future of unsurpassed and unsurpassable brilliance. True, the man himself who would secure to her at the marriage-altar all this rank and wealth and influence, was *not* a man to be desired. He did swear, when he was angry ; he was of a morose and suspicious disposition ; and he had, unless he was greatly belied, harried his first wife into her grave. He was a profligate, too, and his enemies told some very ugly stories of him that could not be hinted at in the presence of young people ; and yet he was the *Duke of Acresworth*, and would make his wife a Duchess ; and he had immense wealth, and was nobly born and descended ; so really Clare *must* make up her mind to sacrifice a few scruples, and marry for ambition. Once Duchess of Acresworth she need not spend too much of her time with him, and she might teach him to mend his ways, too, and to control his unregulated temper, for she certainly was a young woman of courage *and spirit*, and she knew how to hold her own.

So when Clare made her appearance at the breakfast-table next morning, she found, to her infinite relief, that there was a decided improvement in the domestic barometer ; the wind had veered round from north-east to south-west, and the index pointed to "fair," though, as Clare shrewdly suspected, not yet to "*set fair*;" *squalls* and light gales might be looked for, she fancied, but altogether it was much better than "*stormy*," which had for so long been the prevalent character of the Forest home circle.

And Lady Forest perceived that morning another point on which she had erred. She had "worried" the girl till she was on the verge of losing her supreme beauty ; her eyes had lost their wonderful lustre, her perfectly classical nose was swollen and of a purplish rosy tint, her eyelids were rigid and discoloured likewise, and, worst of all, that exquisitely pure complexion, that delicate flower-like tinting, had lost its wondrous freshness. There were plenty of girls *not* accredited beauties who looked better than Clare Darlington, as she sat that morning languidly sipping her

tea, and breaking her dry toast, which was all she would consent to take, into infinitesimal fragments.

"This will never do," reflected Lady Forest; "she looks quite plain; she will soon be *ugly*, if she goes on like this; fretting does not suit her at all. Ah, there is no cosmetic like perfect content, no beautifier like happiness. I must be gracious, I suppose, and let things be on their own old footing for a little while, till she gets up her spirits again and recovers her smiles and her complexion; that dead white and those swollen features are shocking to contemplate; the Duke would whistle her down the wind, if he came and saw her as she is now. He would take alarm at once, I am fully persuaded; he would decide that her beauty was too evanescent to be worth taking much trouble to secure. At this moment, she looks as she might be an old woman at thirty. I really must lose no time. I must not delay a moment in doing my best to restore her to herself. She shall have one more chance, and a good chance, and then, if she still persists in her wicked, selfish obstinacy, I'll wash my hands of her."

Then presently she spoke. "My dear, you are making nothing of a breakfast, and Tarleton tells me you declined the supper she took upstairs last night. You must see my pet doctor; he sets everybody up."

"I am not ill, thank you," replied Clare, in those thick nasal tones that are one of the unpleasant consequences of many tears. "My head aches still."

"And you have a bad cold; there is quite a snuffle in your voice. It is the wretched weather; you must not go out again while this raw, keen wind is blowing; nothing spoils a complexion so badly as an east wind in March. I really think we must run away from London for a week or so. What do you say, my dear?"

"I think I should like a change," answered the girl, hesitatingly and feebly; all the spirit seemed to be crushed out of her, which was not altogether a bad sign, Lady Forest decided. Only it would be useless to bring her to her senses by severe remedies, if loss of beauty was to be the result.

"I am sure it is just what you want," resumed her ladyship; "where would you prefer to go?"

"I have no choice, thank you; anywhere you please." And the voice was cold and constrained; there was even a sullen ring in it as the brief sentence ended. Lady Forest noted this, but wisely made no comment.

"Then I think, my dear," she continued, "we had better go to Bournemouth. I thought of Brighton, and I could have my old rooms at the 'Grand,' I dare say; but it's rather cold in the King's Road at this time of the year, and Brighton is too accessible to be very select during the Easter holidays. I really believe Bournemouth would suit us better at this season; it is so sheltered, you know, and we are pretty sure to light upon some of our dear friends."

"Very well, cousin."

"My dear, you speak as if you had not the smallest interest in the trip. You should not be quite so listless; it—it wearies one; I was going to say it *irritates* one; and so indeed it does. Now rouse yourself a little, Clare; put away that cold tea, and I will ring for some nice hot coffee, and tell them to send up some more kidneys, or a fish omelette, or whatever cook is keeping ready for us. Now, be a good girl, and don't look so very wan and dismal."

Thus adjured, Clare did rouse herself a little; she had been worried and harried into her present forlorn condition, and she felt by no means as sweetly amiable as might have been desired; but she was a sensible young woman, and knew that one of the most foolish things you can do is to quarrel gratuitously with your bread-and-butter. Moreover, she was naturally of a sweet temper, and seldom harboured a grudge. The Stewarts of Kilmarnock Gardens were perhaps the only people in the world towards whom she cherished an actual resentment.

So she made a supreme effort, accepted the hot coffee, which really revived her, and did her best to consume the contents of a *petit plat* which Weller brought up smoking from the kitchen. And breakfast being at last dispatched, it was proposed to take a drive, a long drive, quite out into the country; and why should they not lunch at the *Star and Garter*?

There was no earthly reason why they should not, Lady Forest consenting; so the morning was spent in Richmond

Park, and luncheon was taken as agreed upon, and, after an hour's rest, and a toilet, and a very *récherché* dinner, at which one or two casual visitors were present, Clare felt greatly revived, and perfectly ready to accompany the party to a ballad concert at St. James's Hall. The evening passed happily, the old caressing ways were resumed, and Clare was not the victim of a single *snub*.

Tarleton had received her orders, and was packing-up for Bournemouth, and Weller had intelligently carried out instructions, and telegraphed for rooms. Clare's happiness revived, and her naturally buoyant spirits were once more in the ascendency. She knew that the "enemy"—as she now called the Duke of Acresworth—was at Rome, where he was intending to entertain a large party during "Holy Week." There was little, if any danger, of encountering *him* on Bournemouth Pier, or in the pine-woods. Tarleton could have disturbed her complacency somewhat had she chosen; but after a little reflection, and a short conversation with Mr. Weller, she came to the conclusion that it would be wiser to abstain from putting her finger into a pie of my lady's own concoction. She would not step out of her place; events must take their course, and Miss Darlington, who was not a raw, inexperienced lassie in her teens, might look out for herself.

And a very pleasant week the ladies and their confidential servants passed at Bournemouth, and Clare enjoyed the society of some recent acquaintances, and of some old friends, too. The Duke's name was not even mentioned; doubtless he was already at his Palazzo, not far from the Borghese Gardens, and perhaps attending the services of St. Peter's. That he should enter another St. Peter's, and pervade the walks of some other gardens, very much nearer home, before they returned to Lowndes Square, never once entered into Clare's imagination. An experience was in store for her for which she had not bargained.

Now, the Bournemouth folk, being great go-to-church people, were quite ready for any number of services during Passion-week, and Clare was quite at liberty to attend them, or to stay at home, or to disport herself elsewhere, as pleased her best. Lady Forest's freak of keeping a strict

Lent had disappeared in company with her ill-temper, and she left Clare entirely to her own sweet will. "Do as you think best, my dear," she would say; "don't take me into consideration, I beg. I have had a little faceache ever since I came down here. I am afraid it is rather a neuralgic place; at any rate, I feel inclined to stay quietly at home, or perhaps take a drive in a close carriage with Tarleton by-and-by. The Bullivant girls and the Misses Glencoe will expect you, I am sure; but just please yourself; only do not forget to call at the library, and tell them to send me *all* the new novels I ordered the other day."

And so that week passed peacefully away, though on the whole it was a little monotonous; but going to church at least once a day got rid of some of the time that might else have been burdensome. And Saturday came, and it was Easter-eve, and Clare found herself pledged to join a party of young ladies and their beaux, who had undertaken to decorate the church for Easter-day. Lady Forest had most graciously entered into the plan, which appeared to her to combine amusement, devotion, flirtation, and a fine display of taste, together with a few other peculiar and rather incongruous ingredients. She took care that Clare should have plenty of beautiful flowers, and Weller was deputed to attend upon her; and when the party met, according to arrangement, in the church-porch, on the forenoon of Saturday, there was quite an outburst of admiration at sight of Miss Darlington's floral treasures. The whole assembly combined had not half so many white azaleas and waxy caméllias and lilies-of-the-valley as Clare had collected for herself. As for *arum-lilies*, there was a shriek of mingled envy and delight when Mr. Weller appeared, marshalling two men, who carried large hampers of them, securely packed in moss, and fresh from Covent Garden.

Clare, who at first was enthusiastic, soon grew tired of the unwonted work, and she was glad to sit down quietly, and watch the labours of the others. It was a curious scene, and she, who had always despised *Ritualism*, surveyed it somewhat scornfully. Of course they were all supposed to be "Protestants," though in all probability many of them

could have utterly disclaimed the name ; still, they were all certainly members of the Church of England, as by law established, and *not*—overtly, at least—members of the Church of Rome.

They made, most of them, funny little bows, or “bobs,” rather, towards the chancel, for which the choicest decorations were reserved, and they talked with bated breath about “dressing the altar.” Clare essayed to look demure and grave ; but she tried some of the most devout sadly by asking “*who* or *what* they bowed to ?” since, certainly, there was nothing to be *seen* which demanded, or even sanctioned, adoration.

“ You ought to have a *pyx*, ” said Clare. “ You want what the Romanists call *the Host* in your churches ; then you would have something to bow to. And you call that very peculiar bob ‘*genuflecting*’? It must take some practice to do it well, I should think, or it would look like the reverence of the peasantry to their betters. I suppose dancing-masters undertake to teach ‘*genuflecting*’—isn’t that it?—nowadays, just as they taught us to make court courtesies in other days? It is so very easy to tumble over, if you do not know the exact secret of preserving the centre of gravity. Will that do? *That’s* worth worshipping, I am sure, it is so very lovely ; and the Gospel does say ‘Consider the lilies.’ Of course, it tells us to *genuflect* somewhere ; but I am not a good Bible scholar, and I don’t remember the place.”

Two matronly women, in semi-nunlike costume, looked reprovingly at Clare, and one of them begged her to remember that she was “in church,” and not to speak above her breath. The young ladies, too, seemed rather scandalised ; and but that Miss Darlington had been really pressed into the service, and had contributed more beautiful flowers than they had been able to obtain for the last twelve months, they would probably have administered a severe rebuke.

As it was, Clare did feel a little self-reproved, for she knew she had spoken flippantly, and she ought not to have entered at all into the affair unless she was quite prepared to go through with it in a kindly, if not in a sympathising spirit. She felt a little ashamed of herself, as she remem-

bered that she had, by her own act and deed, identified herself with these people, who, if superstitious, according to her view, were perhaps not less sincere than herself. Ritualism might be the sham of shams, but there were other shams rampant in the social world scarcely less absurd, and very little, if at all, less mischievous.

But the truth was that Clare, who was too often a creature of extremes, was in high spirits, and, as the girls said, "full of fun." Her place was by no means on that day in the quiet church, where, however, a good deal of by-play, in the shape of mild flirtation, was going on. Altogether, she had better have stayed at home with Lady Forest, or have gone the drive to Poole which had been projected. If she annoyed her companions, their revenge was close at hand. She would have been far less elated had she known what was to transpire before that time to-morrow.

For next day, when she arrived to attend the eleven o'clock service, when there was to be a "High Celebration," she was shown into a pew, already tenanted by one gentleman. And she had seated herself, and deposited her ivory-bound and gold ornamented prayer-book, and her "*Hymns Ancient and Modern*," on the desk before her; and she had even criticised some of her own handiwork of the day before, and regretted the arrangement of some of her finest arum-lilies, before she made the appalling discovery, that the gentleman by whom she sat was no other than the person who, of all the world, she least desired to meet—his Grace the Duke of Acresworth.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A LAST APPEAL.

" If you oblige me suddenly to choose,
My choice is made—and I must you refuse."

HOW Clare went through that Easter-day service she never clearly comprehended. She kept her prayer-book open, and that was all, she had no knowledge whatever of the page before her, and she had but the faintest idea of what was going on around her. Once, as she looked up, and beheld the cross of arum-lilies, which she had declared to be "beautiful enough to be worshipped," she thought with a pang of her *nonchalance*, her carelessness, her flippancy of the day before ; how little had she then foreseen the approach of the storm that might be—and probably *was*—fated to overwhelm her. The music was supposed to be unusually good that Sunday, to match with the floral decorations, and all the other embellishments of the festival, but Clare knew very little about it ; the burst of melody from the white-robed choir and the long silent organ was scarcely noticed ; while painfully audible to her ears was the badly intoned response close beside her—"Good Lord deliver us," and then "We beseech Thee to hear us, good Lord."

Little religion as Clare Darlington professed, little sense as she had of true devotion or reverence, it revolted her to hear this man mouthing sacred words at her elbow. What business had he there at all ? He and she had met in divers places ; in the ball-room, at the dinner-table, on the private stage, in the hunting-field, and elsewhere ; and in all, and everywhere, she had despised him and shrank from him, and felt that she could in no wise, nor on any account, nor for any worldly advantage, cast in her lot with his. And now that he knelt beside her, and joined outwardly in the worship of the Anglican Church, she experienced something like *horror* ; and but for the disturbance her egress would have occasioned in that crowded congre-

gation, she would have made her way into the outer air. Lady Forest, after the first glance at the Duke, seemed unconscious of his presence. It was not till the end of the Litany that she gave him a smile of recognition ; her ladyship, when she did go to church, which was not too often, always comported herself with the most edifying decorum.

The service was over at last, weary sermon and all, and the moment Clare dreaded was at hand. So stunned, so utterly nonplussed was she, at the appearance of the foe, that she had not made up her mind in what manner to receive him. A nervous tremor stole over her as she waited while the organ pealed forth its magnificent closing *Gloria*, and the vast congregation slowly dispersed. But her manner was calm and composed when once more in the churchyard, where free speech was possible, he turned to her, and in complimentary phrase declared his happiness at thus meeting her again. Then he addressed himself to Lady Forest, and informed her that he was staying at the Bath Hotel, and almost in the same breath accepted her invitation to luncheon, but excused himself from accompanying them there and then, as he wished to make some alteration in his dress, the wind having changed into a cold quarter since the morning, and he was afraid for his rheumatism.

And so they parted to meet again very speedily, and Clare walked on by her cousin's side, and held her peace. Some of her acquaintances of the day before were not many steps behind, and she tried to loiter as much as she could, hoping that they might overtake her, and break up all possibility of a *tête-à-tête* for the present. But Lady Forest turned into another road, which she said was a short cut to the West Cliff, and the chances of interruption became less.

"Were you not surprised to see his Grace ?" asked her ladyship presently. "And to think of his turning up in church of all places in the world."

"To think of it," responded Clare, quietly ; "I did not know he ever went to church."

"Fie, my dear ; do not utter a libel. Of course he goes to church sometimes, if it is only to avoid singularity. He is not a heathen."

"Indeed! I rather fancied he was."

"For shame, Clare! one would suppose he was what is called an infidel, or an atheist."

"And is he not?"

"Now, do not provoke me, my dear, for I give you notice that my temper may be very easily ruffled. Neuralgia does not conduce to amiability, as you will, perhaps, some day discover for yourself. Let us make haste home and dress for luncheon. You had better put on that new black and silver costume, and fasten a little cluster of narcissus in your hair. Tarleton knows exactly how to do it. I will send her to you as soon as I have finished with her."

"Thank you; but I think I can dress without assistance, and I do not like the smell of natural flowers in my hair."

"Now, Clare, do not be perverse. We have been so comfortable together for the last few days; let us still preserve our amicable relations. Everything has been pleasant and satisfactory since we have been here—let it go on so; let our visit terminate happily."

"I am sure I have no objection, cousin. I do not think I am bad-tempered."

"Then why do you look so cross—so put-out, as it were? You were as blithe as a bird yesterday."

Clare made no answer. If she spoke her mind, the gauntlet would be thrown down, and open war at once declared; and she did so long for peace. She would do anything short of compromising herself to preserve a good understanding between her cousin and herself; for she was beginning to comprehend how untenable her position was, unless there could be cordial agreement between them. She knew now the truth of poor Miss Argles's statement, that Lady Forest "never allowed herself to be thwarted."

With a heavy heart she donned the silver-embroidered robe which had been presented to her as a sort of peace-offering, she thought, a few days before. It was really a most elegant dress, and it became her wonderfully, and yet she shuddered as she contemplated the reflection in the long glass before her, and for the minute wished sincerely that she were not so handsome. Perhaps, for the first time in her life, she deprecated her own beauty, and wished it less;

it was all very well to be admired—she loved admiration, and prized it for as much as it was worth ; but she did not desire to win the plaudits of this detested man, whom nothing less than sole possession would satisfy.

“Oh, why did he come ?” she sighed wearily, as she adjusted her long train. “Why could he not stay in Rome, and prosecute his pleasures there ? I thought I was so safe for the present ; I thought the calm would at least be undisturbed while we remained here. And I did hope my cousin had come to recognise the unsuitability of the match, to feel how vain it was to press upon me this most unwelcome suit ; now I may hope no longer. She must have known that this man was on the road ; she must have arranged it all beforehand ; she must have determined that I should be driven to make the sacrifice, but——”

She was interrupted by the entrance of Tarleton, who brought in a spray of silver-frosted flowers, set with pearls and brilliants, which she proceeded to fasten in Clare’s dark hair. “My lady bade me tell you, ma’am, that she sent this for you to wear to-day, because she thought that it would go with your dress so much better than the narcissuses that I was keeping for you ; and the scent of them *is* rather sickly. The sort we have ready for mounting is almost as bad as *gardenias*, and I have known them be too much for young ladies in a bouquet.”

Clare made no reply, but she allowed Tarleton to fix the jewelled spray. “Never saw anything look more effective,” exclaimed the maid, when the toilet was completed ; “and now, my dear Miss Clare, please excuse me if I entreat you to look a little brighter ; you are not yourself, indeed you are not, when you look like that—you don’t do justice to yourself. And Lady Forest won’t tolerate any nonsense this time ; those were her very words, Miss Darlington.”

“What kind of nonsense will she not tolerate ?”

“Now, Miss Clare, dear, you know very well what she means. Here’s the Dook come back again, and he won’t go away until he has had his answer ; and she’s quite set her mind upon your making this grand marriage. As she says you’ll never have such a chance again—not if you live to be a hundred.”

"I dare say I never shall, Tarleton, and I wish I had not had it now. I shall be contented with something far below a duke. I wish to marry—if I marry at all—in my own station."

"Oh, well, my dear young lady, I wish you well through it; I do, indeed. I can't say I approve of the Dook myself; he isn't a pleasant sort of gentleman, and people do talk about him in a very uncomfortable style. Besides, he is too old for you; the *Peerage* says he is turned fifty-four, and you are not twenty-two. It would be a joining of May and December. But, Miss Darlington, bad as the alternative may be, think twice before you defy my lady; she can be as hard as stone, and as cruel as a sharp sword, and she *never forgives*."

"What can she have to forgive, Tarleton? I only refuse to marry a man I dislike. In nothing else have I opposed her; she has no other fault to find with me. The worst she can say of me is that I will not be a victim to ambition—I simply decline being a *Duchess*. That is no sin, I hope, and if it were any other Duke, I think I might overcome my scruples; for I like rank and wealth and luxury as well as anybody. Say, no more, please, Tarleton, I have made up my mind. There is the bell; I must go down, and I will try to look as pleasant as I can."

And Clare was rewarded for "looking pleasant," for Lady Forest smiled graciously upon her, and the Duke conducted himself irreproachably. He seemed to remember that it was Sunday, and he refrained from his usual jests and expletives; he talked well on many subjects, drank very moderately of claret only, and actually proposed attending the afternoon service. To Clare's surprise Lady Forest assented, and when the bells began to ring they set forth, a demure looking trio, to pay their second visit to the sanctuary.

It was rather a drowsy service, as afternoon services generally are, and Lady Forest, after a little struggle to keep her eyes open, sank into profound slumber before the preacher was fairly launched upon his subject. Clare felt very sleepy, but she managed to keep awake and pay some kind of attention to the service. The Duke's demeanour was faultless, he followed the ritual punctiliously; he

responded loudly, as if he wished the whole congregation to understand that he *had left undone those things which he ought to have done, and done those things which he ought not to have done*. His voice rolled sonorously through the aisles as he knelt devoutly between the two ladies. But, somehow, his ostentatious devotion did not commend him to Clare ; on the contrary, she was glad when the "general confession" came to an end, and the bass voice at her side was silent. She felt as if the service were desecrated, as if the holy words suffered profanation as they fell from his lips, and she knew too well that her judgment was not uncharitable.

It was a long time since either she or Lady Forest had attended church twice in the same day ; the Duke of Acresworth could not remember that in the whole course of his life he had ever voluntarily done so before. But his rôle, just now, was to enact *the penitent*. To Clare's great relief, he did not offer to accompany his friends back to the West Cliff ; he excused himself on the plea that he had made an engagement to dine with an old chum and school-fellow, whom he had met the night before, at the *Bath Hotel*, and whom he had not seen for many years ; but he would, if Lady Forest would do him so much grace as to receive him, invite himself to breakfast, at ten o'clock on the following morning.

Of course, Lady Forest would only be "too much delighted," and the trio separated, to the temporary satisfaction of at least one of them. And, as a party from Boscombe Spa presently looked in, and spent the rest of the evening, the dreaded subject was not renewed. Clare found herself in her room at eleven o'clock, thankful that all had passed off so well, and almost hopeful for the morrow ; they were to return to London on Thursday. Oh, if she could only tide successfully over the next few days ! She felt so much more courageous in Lowndes Square, though she scarcely knew *why* ; here, at Bournemouth, she had a sense of being restrained and fettered, and of being forced continually into society, she would fain have avoided ; and she had been so free, so happy, till this detestable personage arrived. I am afraid Miss Darlington would

have experienced little, if any regret, had the sea risen in its strength that night, and swept away, on an overwhelming tide, the *Bath Hotel* and its numerous fashionable guests.

But not yet was she called to face the dreaded ordeal. Lady Forest was deeply impressed with the wisdom of her own policy, and she had succeeded in convincing the Duke of her superior sagacity. He had been "too blunt," she assured him—too abrupt, too plain-spoken. He had behaved very much like a man who takes it for granted that he has but to ask and to have, and Clare, with her youth and beauty, was naturally displeased. She advised him to suspend his suit for a little while—she would give him a hint should any rival appear—till Miss Darlington should have time to accustom herself to the idea of an elderly lover; and she was not more of a coquette than were most young girls, whom the world had spoiled by countless flatteries. It would all come right if his Grace would take her advice, and be content to progress slowly. Suppose for awhile—say for the next fortnight—he did not put forward his *lover-like* pretensions, but simply behave in a friendly, *fatherly* sort of way, so that she might be won unawares, as it would seem, and feel gradually reconciled to the engagement.

"For I assure you," said Lady Forest in conclusion, "Clare has no favoured lover. She talks a great deal of nonsense about dislike to a married life. I fancy Miss Vanderquist had not a good influence over her while we were at Chilling Towers. But if you will be guided by me, all, I think, will be well; she is shy, and she is a little foolish. Only honour her fancies, be friendly only,—paternal even, if you choose,—and all will surely go as you wish it should. Delay is not always dangerous; it often-times secures safety. One must be content to go a mile or two out of one's way, if, by so doing, one avoids the dangers of the shorter route; better the dull winding high road, which surely brings one to the goal *in time*, than the short-cut across ford and morass, which may possibly end in disaster and defeat."

Clare was puzzled, but at the same time immensely relieved, as day after day passed by, and she was not

annoyed, either directly or indirectly, by the persecution she had apprehended ever since she recognised her fellow worshipper in the pew on Easter Sunday morning. And on the appointed day they said good-bye to Bournemouth, the Duke travelling with them, and placing his own retinue entirely at their disposal. Clare could not but own that it was extremely pleasant to be so well waited on, and to be treated with so much deference. Lady Forest was in all her glory, the pomp of circumstance filled her with delight. "I only wish I had ever had your chances, my dear," she remarked sweetly to Clare, when the Duke left the carriage for a smoke. "It is simply delightful to travel *en duchesse*, with a regular *suite*, and every possible attention, and one's rank recognised by the very porters on the line. I believe the station-master at Lyndhurst took you for 'Her Grace !'"

"I should fancy, cousin, it was *you* who were mistaken for the Duchess ; you would fill the post so well, and you are about the right age for the Duke. You and he must be very nearly of an age !"

"Too much so ; I am far too old. With his rank and fortune, he naturally desires a young and beautiful wife. He has so much to offer, that he is warranted in demanding more than other men. Ah, Clare, you are a lucky girl !"

But Clare made no rejoinder, and just then the Duke returned to his seat, bringing with him some of the morning's papers, while two of his men followed behind with the luncheon basket, which had been packed an hour or two earlier at the Bath Hotel, regardless of expense. And that evening "His Grace" made himself quite agreeable, dining and taking coffee in Lowndes Square, though leaving in good time for his own mansion in Park Lane.

And for a few days all went smoothly, and Clare began to look upon the Duke as a sort of necessary evil, and rather less innocuous than she had ventured to expect. If he would only transfer what he pleased to call "his affections" to Lady Forest, and propose to *her*, what a blessing it would be. And she assured herself that the "two old people really liked each other." I am not certain but that she was even more disrespectful in her heart : I am afraid she once

or twice thought of them as "*old fogies*." But Clare's aspirations were not to be fulfilled ; the Duke no more thought of Lady Forest as a possible wife than of the respectable Mrs. Tarleton or of his own invaluable house-keeper in Park Lane, who was fast approaching the completion of her three-score years and ten. A very few more days, and the tempest would burst ; the artificial calm was violently disturbed, never again to relapse into tranquillity.

One bright April day, Clare, attended by Mrs. Tarleton, drove home from the Court milliner's, where her presentation robes had been long ordered, and for some time in actual preparation. Her Majesty was going to hold a "Drawing-room" in about three weeks ; for certain excellent reasons the pageant had been more than once deferred. So Miss Darlington's presentation had yet to be ; it was still an unaccomplished fact, and an "*unaccomplished fact*" it was fated to remain.

Well, as I said, Clare came home, and found her cousin already presiding over an early luncheon, awaiting her. She had evidently something of importance to disclose, for Clare had no sooner taken her seat at table than Lady Forest dismissed the servants, adding graciously, "I have something very particular to say to you, my dear, so we will wait upon ourselves : everything is to hand."

There was something in her cousin's face that made Clare tremble, and quite took away her appetite for her chicken and ham. A sudden fear smote upon her heart, the Court dress was altogether forgotten, for she knew—she scarcely knew how—that the fated hour had struck. The Duke had spoken at last, and spoken *finally*. She would have to be very firm, and to weigh well her words ; for now her "*nay*" must be *nay* indeed.

"His Grace has been here this morning," commenced her ladyship, "feeling sure of finding us both at home at such an early hour. He was greatly disappointed by your absence, though of course he fully appreciated the duty which called you away. I need not tell you for *what* he came, I may simply say that he has fully explained himself to me, and that all preliminary business is arranged. I

determined to spare you all that I could, dear Clare; he will be here again at half-past two—it is only one now—to receive from your own lips the acceptance of his suit; in other words, to *plight troth* with you; and I am sure the engagement-ring, which he was so good as to show me, is simply *magnificent*. It is composed of large diamonds, of the first water, alternated with *such* rubies as I have seldom seen equalled—he heard you say once that you liked *rubies*. Every girl over fifteen and under thirty will envy you."

"But, cousin——"

"And he told me about the 'settlements,' which his lawyers had orders to prepare immediately; he was quite confidential, I assure you, my dear. The house in Park Lane is to be decorated and furnished afresh throughout, under *your* directions; as is also his Roman palace, and his German *Schloss*. And the family jewels——"

"But cousin—Cousin Forest!"

"Don't interrupt me, my dear, or I shall be sure to forget something. The family jewels are all to be reset; and you are to have a *parure* of diamonds that a royal personage declined—as *too expensive*. And——"

"But Cousin Forest, I must, I *will* speak. For all the diamonds in the world I shall not accept the Duke of Acresworth. I will not *plight troth* with him. I would not be his Duchess for ten million times his wealth and a thousand times his grandeur. Nothing shall ever persuade me to wear his diamond and ruby ring. Tell him so, when he comes; I decline seeing him."

Then Lady Forest blazed forth. Clare had witnessed, had endured, what Tarleton called her lady's "bitter malice and nastiness"; but she had never encountered her *wrath*,—the full measure of her wrath. What passed between them neither exactly ever remembered; but Lady Forest insisted on the Duke being granted an interview, for *she* would not communicate the fact of his rejection. And earlier than he was expected the Duke arrived, and nothing remained but to grant the interview,—and a very stormy interview it was. Clare only knew that she firmly, fully, obstinately rejected the honour of being a Duchess; that her *spirit*—her "wicked spirit," as it was termed afterwards—

carried her through everything; and that at last she was left alone with her cousin; while the Duke, uttering maledictions as he went, took away with him the unpresented diamond and ruby ring.

Clare felt so stunned that she scarcely knew what passed after the departure of her suitor; but as she was about to escape from the room, Lady Forest said—"Do you understand—have you wit enough to understand, that I give you *three days* to come to your senses? It is Tuesday now; on Friday you must either recall the Duke of Acresworth, or leave this house and forfeit my friendship for ever. Now go, and do not let me see your face again, unless you consent to become *Duchess of Acresworth*. I hate perversity, and perversity such as yours is wickedness—positive wickedness; if indeed it is not *insanity*, that calls for medical restraint."

CHAPTER XXV.

SENTENCE OF BANISHMENT.

"Farewell—a long farewell, to all my greatness."

AND Clare Darlington sat alone in her own room, by no means repenting of her decision, but sadly perplexed as to what should be her first move when the three days' grace was expired. She felt very much like a prisoner, though there was nothing to prevent her going out, and taking a walk if she pleased; she scarcely realised, however, how profound was her disgrace till about seven o'clock in the evening, when Weller knocked at her door, and informed her that her dinner was served in a little room near to her own, and that she had but to ring if she wished to summon attendance.

So she rose and hurried to this small chamber, which she very seldom entered, because it contained only discarded

furniture, old chests, and things not generally required. She went with alacrity ; for, having eaten scarcely any luncheon, she was quite ready for her dinner ; and she was pleased to see that she was not by any means limited to prison fare. A dainty little meal was delicately served, and a bottle of choice Burgundy was at her disposal ; there was even an attempt at dessert. Her spirits rose when she had finished her repast, and she was further cheered when she returned to her own room, and found it well lighted up and comfortably warm.

She sat down by the fire, for the evenings were still chilly, and the atmosphere of her impromptu dining-room had made her shiver ; she drew her chair close to the fender, and thrust her feet into her fur-lined slippers, and while she nestled among the downy cushions of her luxurious *fauteuil*, she began seriously to reflect on her position.

She knew her cousin well enough by this time to be quite sure that she would never retract her sentence of banishment, unless she made full and voluntary submission. Nothing less than perfect and unconditional obedience would satisfy her. She must either marry the Duke, and sacrifice herself to her cousin's ambition—scarcely to her own—or she must forthwith leave that home of luxury and pleasure. She could not venture to hope that Lady Forest would rescind her stern decree ; nevertheless, when, just as she was preparing for bed, Tarleton paid her a friendly visit, she could not help asking if she thought there was *any* chance of her lady changing her determination.

And Tarleton unhesitatingly replied, “ Not the ghost of a chance, Miss Darlington ; my lady always abides by her *expressed* decision. There is a good deal of the mule in her disposition, if I may be allowed to say so ; once she has made up her mind, the man or woman doesn’t live who could get her to unmake it ; her laws, her decrees, are those of the Medes and Persians, as Miss Argles used to say. No, Miss Clare, it’s *you* that must give in, if anybody does. I shouldn’t have been surprised, nor would Weller, if she had desired you to remove yourself and your belongings at an hour’s notice.”

“ Has she said anything, Tarleton ? ”

"Very little, ma'am, but she's greatly moved. She only remarked, when I was dressing her for dinner, that she would have no one in her house who dared to oppose her will ; and she added that if you persisted in your contumacy —these were her very words—she hoped you would quit Lowndes Square immediately, without waiting for next Friday. But she did not desire me to say so, ma'am—please to understand ; I bring no *message* from her."

"I think, Tarleton, I had better pack up to-morrow."

"Oh, Miss Darlington, think again. Can't you, *can't you* yield to her wishes ?"

"No, I cannot—I will not. I never disliked a man as I dislike this tiresome Duke. *I hate him.* They say it is wicked to hate any one, and perhaps it is ; but how doubly and trebly wicked it must be to hate your husband. I don't know what one might not be tempted to do, if one ventured upon such an experiment ; to live always and inseparably with a person you hate must be *insufferable*, and would make me, I am sure, much worse than I really am."

"Well, I wouldn't chance it myself. One should, at least, prefer one's husband to any other man. Now, what are you going to do, Miss Clare ?"

"Go to bed ; I am excessively tired, though I am afraid not sleepy. This has been a most exciting day."

"Yes, but I mean, what is your plan for to-morrow ?"

"I don't know, Tarleton. All this afternoon and evening I have not felt sufficiently composed to come to any conclusion. But I dare say I shall have decided before morning—in fact, there is but one course open to me that I can see."

"And that is — ?"

"To go back to my cousins in Moorlandshire. Something else *may* suggest itself. I am too weary to think steadily to-night."

And then Tarleton went away. Though she brought no "message" from her lady, she had come to Miss Darlington's room partly as an envoy, and to see and report how the land lay. Clare was thankful at last to lay down her head on the pillows, and rest without fear of disturbance ; and, in spite of her apprehensions, she fell asleep almost

directly, and did not awake till the clocks were striking five. It was a bright spring morning ; when fully aroused, she sat up, and tried to remember exactly what had passed. All was very still and peaceful ; there was not a sound in the house. Now she could think clearly ; her agitation was calmed ; she was able to form an impartial judgment, and she must decide *at once*, and without an hour's delay, on her future course. No, the decision must not be postponed. To yield to Lady Forest's command was simply impossible ; she did not give two thoughts to that side of the alternative ; it only concerned her to choose what should be her next move—what the imperative duty that lay directly before her.

"Oh, that I had some one to advise me !" she said, sadly, at the end of an hour's fruitless meditation. "Cousin Margery would tell me that I had a counsellor, a friend who would certainly come to my relief, and show me how to act. Suppose I were to ask God to show me my path ; suppose I *were* to put my trust in Him ; to commit my way unto the Lord, as I have heard people say ; and I have often heard that 'man's extremity is God's opportunity.' "

After awhile, as she mused, she remembered Mrs. Darlington's kindly farewell, and her assurance that under any circumstances, or at any time, she would be welcome to return. She had not exactly forgotten that last morning at the Abbey Mill ; but now it came back upon her memory so vividly that she could recall her cousin's very words, and even the sweet smile upon her face. Cousin Margery had said—and she always *meant* what she said—"Remember, my dear, that you have always *a home* here. If you are not comfortable in London, or wherever Lady Forest may pitch her tent, come back to *us* ; your room will always be ready for you."

And, as she thought, her spirits revived ; she saw again the peaceful valley smiling in the autumn sunshine, the grey mists on the hills, and the river flowing serenely between its banks. And she seemed to hear the rush of the mill-dam, and the roar of the grave autumn wind in the sere woodlands round about ; and something seemed to beckon her thither—to the lonely banks of the pleasant Allan Water.

The impulse rose strongly within her to commence her preparations directly, and *go home*.

"And I *will* go," she said to herself; "and that as quickly as possible. I will write to Cousin Margery at once, and tell her I am coming. I may not stay here, except on conditions that are not for an instant to be entertained, so the sooner I depart the better. I will get up, and write my letter this moment, and I will begin to pack directly after breakfast. Why, this is the second letter I shall have written to Cousin Margery under peculiar circumstances. This is only a repetition, with variations, of what befell me at Kilmarnock Gardens; this is my second edition of the pleasant experience of being turned out of doors."

But as Clare settled herself at her writing-table, it suddenly occurred to her that, unless she postponed her journey, she would arrive more quickly than her letter; she might even precede it. Could she venture upon *a telegram*, leaving all explanations till she reached the Abbey Mill? She thought she could, and she determined that she would; she felt so entirely convinced of the perfect sincerity of her cousins Robert and Margery, that she did not hesitate to trust them. She *would* take them at their word.

Even before her breakfast appeared, she began to put away some of her smaller properties. And here a fresh difficulty presented itself; were all these fine things—these *toilettes*, and costumes, and expensive ornaments—really hers? It did not take long to solve the problem; *they were not*. They were, for the most part, given to her under an error; Lady Forest had expected from her what she could not perform. Conscience and pride alike forbade her to take advantage of the opportunity; she neither would nor could appropriate much that was supposed to be her own.

Her next action was to pack sundry jewels that were actually and unquestionably hers; as she did so, separating them from the trinkets that had been bestowed upon her by Lady Forest. She selected from her wardrobe only her plainest and simplest dresses; all her most splendid costumes and toilettes she left undisturbed, all the exquisite laces and graceful Indian muslins that she admired so much were also put away in the cases that were to remain behind.

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The last thing she discarded as "not her own" was the costly robe of rich black silk and silver fringe that she had worn for the first time at Bournemouth, on that memorable Easter Sunday. It must be conceded that she regarded it with a fond and wistful gaze as she laid it carefully on the broad, long shelf of the wardrobe that had, for the last six months, been called "*hers*."

But something happened, before her packing went any further, that wonderfully cheered her heart, and revived her drooping spirits. With her breakfast-tray arrived her share of the morning's postal delivery. There was a letter from Tessie, asking her if she was never coming back again, and saying how glad they would be to see her once more at the Abbey Mill, for the winter was over and gone, and the woods, and fields, and gardens were putting on their beautiful spring-tide array. It comforted her very much to be assured that she was still thought of at the Abbey Mill, and that her sudden visit would not be unwelcome.

Nor was this all ; there was another letter, addressed in a hand she did not in the least recognise ; and with it was a copy of that month's *Grosvenor Magazine*—the periodical to which, more than a year ago, she had despatched that story, or novelette, from which, at one time, she had hoped such great things. She had never expected, and scarcely wished, to hear of it again ; and yet she thought it would be only prudent to let the publishers of the *Grosvenor* know where she was to be found, should they, by chance, have anything to communicate, and the result proved that she had acted at least wisely. A strange, but not unhappy, forboding seized her, and she hastily tore from the magazine its outer wrapper. Yes, it *was* there ; her story was, at last, inserted ; though only part of it, for it was to extend through three successive numbers.

The letter was from the editor of the *Grosvenor*, who complimented her on her story, and informed her that it would have been accepted before, had they not been over-weighted with good "copy," and had not their regular *staff* been more than complete. Circumstances had happened, however, which left more than one vacancy ; two settled contributors had died, and one had relinquished, for some

length of time, literary pursuits. There was now ample room for Miss Darlington's MS., and if she had anything else of the same kind in her desk, Mr. Christopher Grey would be happy to give it "speedy consideration." On the completion of the story a cheque for full payment, on their usual terms, would be forwarded. And the "terms," though liberal, were not overpoweringly so; yet Clare was entirely contented and so grateful, that she whispered to herself, "Thank God!" and cried a little over the courteous editorial letter.

Presently she went out to despatch her telegram, and she had one or two other errands to accomplish; she had a little bill to pay, and an order to countermand. She made haste to finish her business, for she had quite resolved to leave Lowndes Square on the following day, and her packing was nearly all to do. She had lost some time, too, in blissful meditation on her unexpected literary success, and in reading the first instalment of her story, and giving a cursory glance at the other contents of this wonderful and thrice-excellent magazine.

No one came near her that day, not even Tarleton, and she packed, as she had packed at Kilmarnock Gardens, in weary solitude. Still, notwithstanding all that had happened, she felt stronger than then, and a good deal happier. She knew now to whom she was going, and the rapturous surprise of the morning had wonderfully raised her courage. Besides, she was beginning to think of the Mill House as her *home*, the dear home to which she was about to return. She was so happy that she sang aloud as she completed her last package. She was going home, "*going home*."

At last Tarleton did appear, and stood aghast at the preparations for departure, so obviously displayed. "Oh, Miss Darlington," she exclaimed; "then it really is to be? You do mean to go on Friday?"

"I mean to go to-morrow, though perhaps I may not reach my destination till Friday. But I want to know—where is Lady Forest, and is she disengaged; is she alone?"

"Yes, she is alone in her own boudoir, and she says she is poorly; she wrote to put off some friends who were coming to dinner and cards. I wouldn't disturb her, if I

was you, Miss Clare ; she is in a wretched temper. It was as much as ever I could do to be patient. I shan't put up with her tantrums much longer, I can tell her. She won't find another waiting-woman in a hurry, to dress her as conscientiously as I have done these last ten years ; and I know my profession, which a great many *don't*. I would not think of seeing her to-night, Miss Clare."

"I must see her—I must say good-bye. I could not bear to leave her in anger *thus*. She may refuse to receive me to-morrow. She will not expect me this evening. I will go to her at once, without any more ado."

And straightway Clare went, telling herself, as she passed along the corridor; that she was not at all afraid ; nevertheless, she quailed a little when she stood before the door of the "presence chamber," as she had once named it, in jest. She felt disposed to linger a moment ; then she recollect ed that "she who hesitates is lost." So, throwing hesitation and timidity to the winds, she rapped, and straightway entered. Lady Forest, who seemed lost in meditation, scarcely noticed her ; she had probably expected Tarleton, whom she had sent, not a quarter of an hour before, to Miss Darlington's room. But intuition told her quickly that it was not her trusted maid, and she lifted her head, and saw standing before her, with clasped hands and bowed head, her recusant *protégée*. A wild hope sprang up within her breast that Clare had at last yielded, and had come to assure her of penitence and compliance.

"Well, my dear ?" she cried, quite cordially, as if they had not parted in anger.

"I came to say good-bye, cousin, for perhaps to-morrow there may not be the opportunity."

"To say *good-bye* !"

"Yes. I could not bear to leave you estranged—who knows whether we may ever meet again ? For you have been *very*, very kind to me, cousin Forest, and I have been so happy since I came to you. I hate this man more than ever, now that he is the cause of our separation."

"It is yourself, and not his Grace of Acresworth, who makes the breach, Clare. If you are happy here, why go away ?"

"Because in any case you *send* me from you ; it is not that I voluntarily go away. But since I *must* go—either to the Duke or elsewhere, I choose the 'elsewhere.' I prefer any lot to *selling myself*."

"Do not be coarse, I beg ; such allusions are offensive—improper."

"But the thing itself is still more improper."

"A solemn and legal marriage, your nearest and best friend consenting, cannot possibly be improper. Does not the Bible say 'Marriage is honourable in all'?"

"Yes, and it says a little more. God cannot look upon such an alliance as you would force me into as an honourable marriage. Such an union must certainly displease Him. How can I stand at the altar and utter vows that must be a mockery? How could I take *Him* to witness as I promised solemnly to love, honour, and obey a man whom I regarded with repulsion and abhorrence?"

"Clare, I did hope you had returned to your senses ; I perceive now that I was mistaken. Nothing can overcome your obstinacy, nor shake your selfish determination. Having come to this conclusion, let it be, we will say no more about it ; I, too, have a will of my own—good-bye."

"Oh, cousin, do not let us part in anger ; I am not ungrateful"

"I think you are abominably ungrateful. I ask you to do one thing, and one thing only. I have never striven to coerce you in any other matter. I have done my utmost to procure you every advantage—everything that heart could desire ; I would have married you *splendidly* ; and my one prayer you will not grant. Ungrateful !—can ingratitude surpass yours?"

"I will do anything else you bid me. Set me any hard task, and I will do my best to accomplish it ; for, indeed, cousin Forest, I feel how much I owe you ; I am not insensible to your kindness ; I cannot bear that you should consider me ungrateful."

"Then prove your gratitude. Words are quite worthless when they are not accompanied by corresponding action. Be your own benefactor—you will best serve yourself in obeying me ; mere assertion goes for nothing ; I want *proof*."

"Ask for any other proof, and I will give it, even though it cost me much. I would become a Mohammedan if you bade me ; I would risk my life to serve you. I would, indeed, I would—nay, do not smile so scornfully, Cousin Forest—do anything—"

"*Except* what I desire ! You are very generous, but I do not want you to disgrace yourself by being false to Christianity ; nor do I require you to risk your life for me. If you please you will terminate this discourse ; I have already said 'good-bye.' You came to bid farewell, I think you said ? Well, that being said, let us part. I am tired ; I am very far from well."

"Then good-bye, cousin. I *am* grieved to disappoint you, though you will not believe it. Some day I think you will do me justice—you will comprehend that I could not do otherwise. May I not kiss you ? "

"No, you may not. All is over between us ; henceforth we are strangers—more absolutely strangers than when we met. Again, *good-bye*."

"Then, good-bye. Nay, but I will kiss your hand ; I will not leave you in displeasure, as far as I can myself order it. If ever I can repay any iota of your kindness, I will."

"Pray cease ; my head is quite distressing—I am going to ring for Tarleton ; I must go to bed. I will give orders for Weller to accompany you on your journey ; a Darlington may not travel unattended."

"I would so much rather go alone, if you please. If you would allow him to put me into the train I should regard it as a parting kindness. I am not timid, you know, and I shall be met, I think, at Allan Bridge. I have chosen that line of rail, as being much more convenient than the other one, though it is the longer journey."

"Allan Bridge ! Then you are going back to rural felicity and your loutish cousins. I dare say you will marry one of them—those young fellows are not bad-looking, and you will, doubtless, be much happier as mistress of the Mill than as Duchess of Acresworth. There is no accounting for tastes, and some people have innately low tastes. You must inherit yours from your mother's family ; you are only half, *not half* a Darlington—your conduct and your

proclivities prove it. There ought to be a law forbidding well-born gentlemen to marry beneath them."

There was a red spot on Lady Forest's cheeks, and an ominous sparkle in her eye, that Clare, and all about her, had well learned to understand ; her ladyship's temper was chafing against the restraints of good-breeding ; in another minute it would burst all bounds. Clare did not see why she should stay there to be insulted ; farewells had been exchanged, and that must suffice. With one last look around the familiar room, and a parting glance at the face of her incensed kinswoman, she turned away. She finished all her packing, with Tarleton's help, that night ; and, early in the morning, her breakfast was brought to her, and an intimation that Weller would be ready to attend her to the station at half-past ten o'clock, and that the large carriage would be at her disposal.

"And I was to see that the sandwich case was filled, ma'am, and I was to look for a travelling flask, and ascertain which wine you would prefer."

"Tell Lady Forest I thank her, and feel very deeply these last acts of kindness," was all Clare could manage to say ; for, strive as she would, her composure was fast deserting her, and she did not want to leave the house, in the presence of the servants, otherwise than collectedly. But she had to choke down the tears as she saw the last of her luggage carried into the hall ; and she scarcely dared to look round her as she hurried down the stairs and past the drawing-room, which she had not entered since her sentence of banishment had been pronounced, two days before.

Another minute, and she was on the doorsteps, and Weller was waiting to hand her respectfully into the carriage ; she took her seat, and he took his beside the coachman, on the box. The signal to start was given ; she looked up at the house, but could see no one at the windows save Tarleton, who was waving her adieu, and a little maid looking out from the dining-room. She had left Lowndes Square ;—would it be for ever ?

CHAPTER XXVI.

A LONG JOURNEY.

“ We ask Thy Peace, oh Lord !
 Through storm and fear and strife,
 To light and guide us on
 Through a long struggling life ;
 While no success or gain
 Shall cheer the desperate fight,
 Or nerve, what the world calls,
 Our wasted might :—
 Yet pressing through the darkness to the light.”

ONCE more in the busy, bustling Euston Road, and past St. Pancras Church ; once more at the noisy railway-station and on the crowded platform, among passengers, hurrying porters, and civil guards. Clare felt as though a few days only had elapsed since she had last visited those scenes ; and yet it was six months since she had alighted there with Lady Forest, and driven away in that same carriage to her new and untried home in London.

Weller brought her ticket, and found her a comfortable seat ; then he respectfully bade her adieu, adding, “ I must not delay, Miss Darlington ; my lady ordered me to return as speedily as might be, and you know she expects always to be obeyed. I wish you a very pleasant journey.”

“ Thank you, Weller,” replied Clare. “ Do not loiter ; I should be so sorry to be the cause of your receiving a reprimand. Please to remind Tarleton to water the plants I nursed through the winter ; she has promised to take care of them for my sake.”

“ I will not forget, Miss Darlington ; and I hope we shall see you back again among us before long.”

“ I think I shall not return very soon to Lowndes Square, if ever ; but I thank you, Weller, for your kindly wish. Now we are off.”

And at that moment the signal was given, and the long train started on its northern journey. Weller was seen no

more ; the last poor link between herself and the old life was severed, and as she was quite alone in her compartment, she ventured to indulge in a flood of tears, which, however, greatly relieved her. She soon dried her eyes, and recovered her composure, and began to look out upon the pleasant rural landscape with something like enjoyment.

And though she was leaving behind her, perhaps for ever, the graceful life that had been so fascinating ; though she was putting from her by this act, which she was still sure she never should repent, the gaieties, the luxuries, the countless pleasures which had certainly afforded her much gratification, she was not actually unhappy. Nay, as the distance between her and the metropolis increased, something like hope seemed to revisit her. She was "going home." She told herself that, over and over again ; and the purer air of the real country, and the clear April sunshine, and the flitting vision of flowery mead and lanes, really tended to revive and cheer her spirits. She felt calmer, too, more restful, more serene than had been the case for many a day ; for there had been a strain upon her, a certain sense of perplexed unquiet ever since the final weeks of her visit at Chilling Towers.

And now she began, as it were, to retrace her steps, to consider very earnestly the causes of her continual depression. She had known so many vicissitudes, it seemed to her ; she had tried so many phases of life ; she had thrown herself into so many alluring distractions, and always with little or no success.

" I have not *dreamed* my life," she said to herself, as she was swiftly borne along on the journey. " I have interested myself in so many things, I have snatched at so many glittering baubles ; I suppose I have been like a child pursuing the rainbow, or striving to catch a many-coloured bubble. I have tried to be happy—that is, happy in my lot, and I am not satisfied. Was Cousin Robert right when he said I never should be satisfied till *I found Christ!* And what is it to find Christ, I wonder ? I suppose I believe that He was born in Bethlehem, and lived and taught on earth, and died on Calvary ; but that knowledge does not seem to be enough. There must be something more ——————

Cousin Robert and Cousin Margery, and Tessie and Edith must have some other ground to rest upon ; Dick must know something more than I know, or he never could have prayed that prayer on that first Sunday I spent at the Abbey Mill."

And then the train slackened speed for a little while ; they were going over a part of the line that was under repair, and the signal for caution was displayed. Clare perceived that they were close upon one of those retired nooks that lie in the peaceful heart of happy England—villages where one fancies the busy hum, the disappointments, the vexations, the ambitions of the world can never come—so calm, so peaceful, so undisturbed must be "the noiseless tenor of the way" of the simple inhabitants.

The rail wound slowly round the village churchyard, half filled with grey, lichenized headstones, and nameless grassy mounds ; in the middle rose the rural temple, partly covered with ivy, the mossy walls slowly sinking to decay. A little further on was the village green, and here there was a pretty presentation of rustic life. There was a pool, with ducks and geese swimming upon it ; there were children at play ; there was a cow being slowly driven across the green sward. At the door of a little thatched cottage, with a clean curtain, and flowers in the window, and blue smoke coming out of the whitened chimney, was a man smoking his after-dinner pipe before he returned to his work. His face was ruddy, and beamed with full content ; at his side stood his wife, smiling and talking, and diligently knitting a coarse worsted stocking ; two children, decently though very poorly apparelled, were sitting on a low step. The man, is comely wife, and the rosy children all *looked* satisfied.

And Clare resumed her meditations—"Surely they must be happy, for they want so little, and that little they appear have. The man goes to his daily toil, and comes back the evening to his own dear home ; the wife cleans, and cooks the frugal meals, and perhaps nurses a crowing babe, rocks the cradle ; and the elder children go to school, in their simple lessons, and enjoy their freedom afterwards. At night they all sleep under that lowly thatch, free and free of care as the birds under their eaves. On

Sunday they don their modest finery, and trudge to yonder little church. Winter and summer, spring and autumn, bring them all the variety they know; and when their earthly life is over, instead of going to the dear old church, they are carried there, and lie with their forefathers beneath the sod."

And while Clare wondered whether these poor peasants were "satisfied," something—she could not tell what—brought back to her the memory of that Sunday, and the unpretending morning service in the dining-room, that had so genuinely astonished her. How sweetly they all sang that pretty hymn, and how well she remembered those lines—

"There shall we see His face,
And never, never sin;
There from the rivers of His grace
Drink endless pleasures in."

"Endless pleasures!" she repeated to herself. "Ah, well, in heaven things will be endless, of course; but what sort of pleasures, I wonder? And Cousin Robert read from the Bible, 'He will swallow up death in victory, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces'; and how his face lighted up, and his voice rose as if in triumph! he seemed to take it as a sober certain reality; he was waiting for the time when he should win the victory;—through *Christ*, I suppose he would say,—for all joy and blessing is in Christ,—according to Cousin Robert, and the rest of them. And then, *the peace that passeth understanding*. Tessie knows it; she said she did,—and I could see it was the *very* truth. And she, and all of them, indeed, spoke always of God as their *Father*, their Father whom they loved, and reverenced, and trusted more than they could tell."

And then, perhaps for the first time in her life, Clare *prayed*. Appeals had been forced from her in hours of extremity; she had cried out to a sort of Christianised Jupiter Tonans when the great thunderstorm was about her; she had implored a nineteenth-century Jupiter Pluvius, when it rained and rained till she was sick of it. She had called upon *Somebody*, an Almighty a great way off, whom

she could not at all define, when her father died, and when she sat helpless and friendless in her solitary attic chamber in North Tyburnia. But she had never before really and truly *prayed*; she had perhaps *clamoured* to an unknown god, as a hungry beggar clamours for relief. She had never gone, as a child goes to its parent, asking help *and* forgiveness; but now, through all the roar and rattle of the train, a voice spoke within her soul; a voice she might have heard, but never listened to before, and she implored from her heart's depths: "Lord, grant *me* Thy peace!" And then one supplication followed another, her lips were unlocked at last, and she cried for pardon as she had cried for peace. She forgot the flight of time; she passed by many lovely scenes, scarcely noting the delicate spring flowers that starred the green banks of the rocky cutting through which she was borne, for her whole soul was filled with wonder and joy. She held communion with her Lord; she, too, talked with "One unseen," though no longer unfelt, and she ventured to hope that she had "found peace," or at least was in the way to find it. And again and again her earnest prayer went up, "Grant me Thy peace!"

It was not the first time the words had passed her lips; but then they were *only* words. The officiating clergyman had said, "Oh, Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world," and she had responded, as all around her did, "Grant us Thy peace." But she had not looked for peace, she had not really asked for peace; she had but joined in a response that was part of the ritual of the Anglican and Roman Churches. In themselves, they were sacred words —*most* sacred; but as uttered by her, perhaps by thousands of others, they were meaningless.

"Is this finding Christ?" she asked after awhile. "I wish I knew. Yes, I think it is; I see Him, know Him, as I never did before now. He is not a mere historical Christ, an orthodox Christ, so to speak, any more; I take Him for my Saviour and my Lord. And I am *satisfied!* At least, I believe I am. O Lord, increase my faith!"

But at this moment the train once more slackened speed, and finally stopped at a platform where a number of people were waiting. Weller had had orders to see the guard, and

to place Miss Darlington under his care ; so he came now to her compartment to ask if he could do anything for her comfort, and if she would mind an old gentleman—a very good old gentleman, a sort of a minister—travelling with her to a station about twenty miles further on. “For you see, miss,” the man continued, “the first-class carriages are all pretty full to-day, and I must find a comfortable seat for the old gentleman ; I think you would prefer his company to that of two very talkative ladies and their noisy boys, else I could bring them here.”

“Oh, no ; pray do not,” replied Clare ; “that is, if they are accommodated elsewhere. I should very much prefer the clergyman.”

“I don’t know that he is a proper clergyman, miss ; but he preaches and prays, and all that. You may be quite at your ease with him ; he is old enough to be your grandfather.”

Clare was rather sorry that her solitude should be invaded, but she did not give way to the pettish vexation in which she too frequently indulged when her will was crossed ; and she looked pleasantly at the old gentleman, and gave him her hand as he mounted from a rather low platform, for he seemed infirm, and the guard, though he hurried up, was not in time to assist him, being detained for the moment by another passenger. Yes, he was indeed venerable. His face was wrinkled, his hands bore the impress of extreme old age, and his silvery locks made him look like an Apostle, or rather, as Clare assured herself, like the *pictures* of Apostles, as they are generally delineated. The “Apostle” thanked her courteously, and settling himself in the corner furthest away from her, took from his pocket a little volume, and began to read. She wondered what it was that engaged his attention, but on the whole she was glad that he did not enter into conversation ; she did not wish her train of silent thought to be disturbed.

But they had only travelled a very few miles when he called her attention to the exceeding beauty of the country through which they were passing. “There is not a lovelier district anywhere, to my mind,” he said, as they looked down upon a green, well-watered valley, where the trees were

budding and some almost in leaf, and where, in the pleasant meadow through which a clear blue stream was winding, the wild daffodils were "fluttering and dancing in the breeze." "But then, it is my own country," he continued. "I was born over there, where you may see an old timbered house among the trees. And in a little humble graveyard, not two miles away, my own dead are sleeping in Christ till the resurrection morn. And in those woods yonder, where the dark fir branches mingle with the purple and olive green and silvery greys of the springtide foliage, I often wandered when I was a boy, gathering primroses and blue-bells, and other flowers of the field ; and there, when a young man, I walked and mused and sought the Lord."

"And did you find Him ?" she asked eagerly.

"Blessed be his Holy name, I did," he replied. "He called to me, and by His grace I answered and said, 'Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth.' And God talked with me at eventide, even as he talked with His saints of old—though I saw Him not with my mortal vision. That was fifty years ago, young lady ; I was little more than a youth then ; now I am almost fourscore ; and I would tell to every stranger whom I meet, that all through these long years of mingled pain and joy, and failure and success—through many varied circumstances, the Lord has never forsaken me. He has upheld me *always*. He has guided me along many a devious path ; He has taught me, and comforted me, and He has put many a psalm in my mouth in the night-season of affliction, and many a song of praise and thanksgiving. All these fifty years has He led me ; I have found him ever faithful—ever true. And now that I am getting to the bottom of the slope, and I see the waves of Jordan not afar off, I can still sing, 'The Lord is my shepherd.' "

"Does the Lord call *all*, do you think ?" she asked, timidly.

"Yes, *all* ; in some way or another. Has He not called *you* ?"

"I am not sure, but I think so," she replied ; "only I have loved the world and the things of the world supremely, and my heart is hard. I have tried to be happy ; I have

sought happiness in a hundred ways ; but a good man once told me that I should never be *satisfied* till I found Christ."

" And he was right, as by this time you know if you have found the Lord Christ. In Him is strength, and joy, and Life Eternal ; out of Him all is weariness and disappointment. *He* never sends the hungry away unfed ; the needy who come to Him find ever all they want. Dear young lady, take the testimony of an aged pilgrim who is almost within sight of the Celestial Gates ; all these years, by His grace, I have served under His banner and confessed His name, and gloried in being *His*, and He has never failed me. He has redeemed every promise that He ever gave me ; His tender mercies, and His lovingkindness, have been about my path continually. The angel of His Presence has saved me, and brought me even to this day. And very soon, when I have quite finished the tasks appointed me, not before, He will call me—*Home*. For me the sands of time are sinking, the night is far spent, and the morning of Heaven is at hand. And my last song, I think, will be ' unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, be glory and dominion for ever and ever.' "

" I could reply," was Clare's answer, " let *me* die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like His. But then I have a long, long way yet to go, and I fear I may not live the *life of the righteous* as I ought. I may not be faithful unto the end."

" Ask for grace to hold fast that which He commits to you. He will hold *you* fast, though your faint clasp sometimes fall from His, if you trust Him, if you commit yourself to Him for ever and for evermore. Dear me, I know by certain landmarks that I am nearing the end of my journey, and we must part ; the Lord bless you, dear young lady, and grant you all faith, and courage, and wisdom for the long journey you are just beginning. The Lord give you *the peace that passeth all understanding* ; good-bye ; we shall meet again in yonder world beyond the grave." And at that moment the train stopped, and the carriage-door was instantly opened by a young man, who reverently welcomed the old gentleman, and helped him to alight.

And very soon she perceived familiar landmarks. There

was the beautiful bay, with its waves rolling in with the rising evening-tide, and several miles further on she was skirting the broad estuary ; the red and golden light of sunset was resting on the sands, while all along the opposite shore the great scarred cliffs showed purple in the gathering shadows of the fair, soft spring evening. And then beyond this the estuary narrowed, and coasting-vessels and fishing-boats were going up with the tide to the little harbour.

A few minutes more, and the rail was passing through the fields, and by the gardens of the outskirts of Allan Bridge. Then suddenly they seemed to plunge into the town ; and on either hand were the backs of houses, and the view of courtyards, and here and there a glimpse of miniature docks, and many a token of the maritime character of the antique place. There was a smell of tar, and ropes, and fish, and everything else that goes to the making-up of an inconsiderable seaport ; and even as Clare gazed and told herself that she was only a few miles from Duston now,—the good train steamed into the station, where, in the growing dusk of the evening, there was the usual bustle and din of arrival.

Had her telegram been received ? she began to question rather anxiously ; would she be met ? For if she found no friend awaiting her, she would have to remain all night at the little inn where the miller and his family generally “put up.” At the first glance she saw no familiar face ; but the daylight was fading, and the lamps were only lighted here and there ; the whole station seemed dim and shadowy. At that moment, as she was taking down her travelling-bag from the net, a warm hand was laid upon hers, and the carriage door was opened, “Here you are ; I was not quite sure at first,” were the words that saluted her ear, in a well-known voice, that made her heart leap for joy. Once more her Cousin Robert was waiting to receive her ; and there in the station yard was the old wagonette and the two fine horses that she knew so well.

“Oh, Cousin Robert,” she exclaimed, when he had bestowed upon her quite a fatherly kiss,—a kiss that was a hundred welcomes in itself ; “I am *so* glad to get home.”

“Are you, child?” he replied, “I dare say ; and so are we

to get you home again. The mother had more than half a mind to come with me, but I would not let her, because of the return drive, which will certainly be a chilly one, and she is only just getting quit of one of her troublesome colds. Don't you want something to eat, my dear, before we start for the Mill?"

"Oh, no, thank you, I have had plenty of sandwiches and biscuits; I am very tired, but not at all hungry."

"Then we will set off at once; your train is just a little behind time, and a few minutes make all the difference at this time of the year. I want to get home before dark, for the moon is not of much account as yet; we shall do it very well, for the horses have had a good feed, and, knowing the ground so well, I shall not be afraid to take the short cut by the cross-roads."

C H A P T E R X X V I I .

CLARE'S CONFESSION.

"Weary of wandering from my God,
And now made willing to return,
I hear, and bow me to the rod,
For Him, not without hope, I mourn :
I have an Advocate above,
A Friend before the throne of love."

THE stars were beginning to glow in the transparent, night-fall sky, when Clare heard the well-known roar of the mill-dam, and saw their reflection upon the placid waters of the lower pool. In five minutes she was in the house, in Mrs. Darlington's motherly arms, and being petted and made much of by all the family. How comfortable it looked, the great dining-room, with its drawn curtains, its blazing fire, and its hospitable table, well spread with all the items and adjuncts of a splendid supper-tea!

"I suppose you are well accustomed to late dinners now,"

said the miller, as he took his seat at the foot of the board, and proceeded to dispense huge slices of a wonderful "chicken-pie, that was compounded, Edith informed him, of a great many other good things besides chickens, such as 'ham and veal,' and rabbit, and pigeons, and hard-boiled eggs, and meat-jelly, and savoury tit-bits past count."

"Yes," replied Clare, "I very seldom dined before eight o'clock in Lowndes Square, and never before seven; but it was 'dinner' more in name than in reality, for I was generally hungry enough in the middle of the day, when I chiefly made my dinner. The later meal was really supper, only it was more costly, and more elaborately served than the luncheon, and it was followed by dessert, which the earlier repast was not. I assure you I shall be delighted to return to primitive hours."

"Well, Tessie here, in her joy at your return, was for ordering dinner at eight o'clock to-night for your especial benefit; but mother and I, and the boys too, all thought an informal meal would be by far the better thing, and there is nothing like a good cup of tea when you are really, wholesomely tired, as you must be, I am sure. Now, you are to eat all that pie on your plate, every bit of it, for it's made after my wife's mother's own private recipe—that she had from the great Duke of Wellington's housekeeper."

"Nothing can be better than a substantial tea, like this. I am very glad you did not give me late dinner. This is a thousand times better. I have not seen such cream since my last breakfast here; only, Cousin Robert, you must not expect me to distinguish myself at the table to-night. I have lunched, or *dined*, rather plentifully on delicious sandwiches, and I had biscuits besides, and a flask of excellent Burgundy and water, not yet exhausted."

"That was good. My lady seems to have been much more considerate than your cousins at North Tyburnia were; *they* sent you away empty-handed, I remember; and you were nearly starving when you got here."

"Lady Forest has been extremely kind to me," replied Clare; "she has been very generous in her gifts, and has heaped upon me all kinds of benefits."

"Then, *why* did you come away?" interrupted Lina,

rather pertly. "I don't think I should ever have wanted to leave so much pleasure and gaiety."

Tessie and Mrs. Darlington both tried to frown the young lady down, for they were tolerably certain that there was a painful reason for Clare's abrupt return, and Lina was so much given to asking thoughtless questions that her brothers had christened her "Miss Inquisitive," and tried to impress upon her the propriety of being seen, rather than continually heard.

But Clare was not at all discomposed, and she answered,—"I came away, Lina, because I was compelled to come. I will tell your mother all about it to-morrow morning; I do not feel equal to grave conversation to-night, if she will excuse me."

"My dear," said Cousin Margery, "I don't want to hear a word of explanation till you are quite ready to make it, and not then if you would rather keep silence. You are here, and we are all rejoiced to have you again. Let that suffice."

"Thank you, cousin," replied Clare, gratefully. "It will be a relief to talk to you presently, but I have had a very trying week;" and here the tears rose and, filled her eyes, and her voice faltered. Edith did her best to make a diversion. "Cousin Clare," she interposed, "if you are really determined to eat no more of that pie, let me take your plate and give you something that you will like better. Lina, go and fetch the glass-dish that stands in the china-pantry. We are going to surprise you, Clare. You shall see what you shall see in a moment!"

And immediately Madeline entered with the glass-dish piled high with rich, ripe strawberries. She placed it triumphantly before her cousin, while the miller said, "There, my dear, I do not think you will beat those in Covent Garden!"

"No, indeed!" was Clare's rejoinder. "Of course you can get strawberries in London as early as February; but then they are awfully expensive, and they never seem to have the right taste. The fragrance of these is enough—it is quite a pity to eat them."

"They are meant, nevertheless, to be eaten, and they

were specially gathered, if not grown and ripened, with a view to *your* eating them."

"They are from your own little hot-house?"

"Not the Mill hot-house. We tried our hand at strawberry-growing under our own glass, I must confess, but it was a decided failure; the plants began to blossom and then damped off; the fruit altogether declining to set. But some one else, who will be here presently, has had much better success. Philip has been doing a good deal lately, both in fruit and flower-growing. He promises us early peaches and wonderful melons in a couple of months at the latest: and he told us, a week ago, we should have plenty of strawberries in about ten days. So when we got your telegram yesterday, he cried, 'Hurrah! I shall have strawberries enough to make a very pretty little dish to set before her when she arrives.' And this afternoon, not more than an hour ago, I suppose, he gathered these; he would not let any one else touch them."

"No!" interposed the irrepressible Madeline. "He would not let me gather one, though I went across to the Farm on purpose to help him. And when I gave him a nice lot of leaves for garnishing the fruit, he just flung them aside, and said he preferred arranging them himself. And he got fresh leaves, and lined the dish, and told me to keep my meddlesome little fingers to myself. So the whole offering is Philip's, Clare."

"I am very much obliged to Philip. I never tasted more luscious fruit at Midsummer."

And, almost immediately afterwards, he entered, apologising for having been detained, and evincing much pleasure in finding his strawberries so evidently appreciated by the person for whom they were intended.

"I always hoped you might return before they were quite over," he said, as he helped Clare to a fresh supply; "but I could scarcely expect to present you with the *first fruits*."

And though his good breeding forbade him to put the question direct, his dark eyes said almost as plainly as words, "To what fortunate circumstance am I indebted for this opportunity of paying the desired tribute so speedily?"

But no words were spoken, and very soon it was proposed

that Clare should go to her own room, for she was growing paler and looked more exhausted every moment, while she strove in vain to appear interested in the news of Duston and its neighbourhood. When she was gone upstairs the miller remarked that she was looking quite worn out, worried indeed ! He was afraid "my Lady Forest had treated her kinswoman to some of the little tantrums of which poor Miss Argles had so bitterly complained."

And Mrs. Darlington replied "that it might be so, though Clare had given no hint of unkind treatment ; it was not at all impossible that hot rooms and late hours had injured her health ; she had, perhaps, danced the flesh off her bones, and driven the roses from her cheek, and the lustre from her eyes, by incessant dissipation."

No more was said just then, but an hour or two later, when the miller and his wife were alone, the latter asked if any explanation had been offered during the drive from the railway station, and Mr. Darlington replied, "Only an apology for not writing, because she knew that our post deliveries were about the tardiest and the most unreliable in England ; but something untoward *has* happened, I feel sure, the tears came into her eyes just as they did at supper-time, when she said there was no time for anything beyond a telegram, and she thought she could trust us."

"Poor child ! She has found out, I daresay, that all is not gold that glitters. She was warned, but she would buy her experience first-hand, and at her own cost. I wonder whether the marvellous novel is finished ; however, I shall know all to-morrow, I dare say."

And "to-morrow" Cousin Margery did know all. Clare breakfasted in her own room, as she was imperatively bidden to do, not at all against her inclination, for she was still very weary, and felt some shrinking from meeting the whole family circle until after a due explanation of her sudden and most unexpected appearance in their midst. How sweet it was, how very calm and bright, and how beautiful was the bloom of the primroses, and anemones, and hyacinths, and early tulips in the garden beds beneath her window. And the flush of dull purple, and bronze, and emerald-greens and olive-greens was on the budding foliage

of the woods sloping upwards from the river banks, where already the wild daffodils were in all their glory.

"When I went away in October," she said, to herself, "how all the life and beauty of nature seemed dead or slowly expiring; the trees were almost leafless, all around were 'bare, ruined choirs, where once the sweet birds sang'; the feathered choristers themselves were silent, all but the redbreast, and that faithful old blackbird that Ralph says warbles a little till the snow comes every year. And now—now—the tender green and the sweet flowers are everywhere again; how exquisitely those *ribes* bloom, what a mass of richest, purest colour against the budding limes! Solomon, in all his glory, was not arrayed like these. This must be the 'annual miracle of the resurrection' that Dorothea Vanderquist was talking about one day when Lady Rosamund brought in the first snowdrops of the year. What a change from the decay and desolation of all things six months ago. It is so very fair, so exquisitely sweet and pure, this tender beauty of the spring; and now I think I may say—I *hope* I may say—'my Father made them all.'"

An hour afterwards she was in search of Cousin Margery, for she felt that she had a sort of confession to make, and could not be comfortable or at rest until it was over. She found Mrs. Darlington issuing from the dairy, with some cream she had been skimming from the pans, and she asked how soon she would be ready to sit down and talk.

"In five minutes, my dear," she answered; "for I have just completed my little roll of duties; I must give this cream to cook—I always do my own skimming, if you remember—and I must speak to Edith about some custards for supper; and then I am at your disposal. There is a nice fire in the best parlour—we will sit there and have our little chat; we shall not be so liable to interruption as elsewhere."

"And now, my dear, what is it?" Mrs. Darlington asked, as she established herself, with her knitting, in the sunny bow-window. "I see you scarcely know where to begin your story."

"I will begin it, if you please, Cousin Margery, at Chilling Towers, where you know we spent our Christmas—

Lady Forest and I. I wrote to you early in the year, I recollect, though I am ashamed to think what a careless, formal epistle it was."

"We were very glad to hear that you were quite well and enjoying yourself. We had heard so little from you since the first week of your arrival in Lowndes Square. Madeline was extremely interested in your account of Madame Marie's showroom and your own silver-grey and pink coral '*toilette*.' But, tell me, did you find any nice people at Chilling Towers—where you say you *ought* to have been born, but were *not*?"

"I found a Miss Vanderquist there, who was remarkably nice, and with whom I became great friends ; and I should have written to her, not exactly for advice, but yet for some kind of counsel, when Cousin Forest placed before me the cruel alternative of obeying her in one particular, which I felt to be quite impossible, or, leaving the house in three days."

"And you chose the alternative, for you are here. Tell me all about it, if it be any comfort, my dear child ; I can see you have been in sad trouble."

"Cousin, did you ever hear of the Duke of Acresworth ?"

"Yes, I have, Clare ; but I am afraid I never heard any good of him. There was a sad story about him two or three years ago, in the lifetime of his Duchess ; a half-sister of mine married one of his head-keepers, and lived—lives still, in a lodge, in Acresworth Park, in the next county. It is so sad and so disagreeable a story that I think I will not repeat it ; but what can the Duke of Acresworth have to do with your discomfiture ?"

"He has everything to do with it. I lived most happily with my cousin till he came between us and spoilt everything."

"Is he, then, going to marry her? I know he is a widower."

"Oh, no. Except that I am sure she would repent it, I wish it were so. Unfortunately, it was myself he wanted."

"You, my dear! Why, he is about the same age as your father would have been had he lived till now. And then—without condescending to scandal—one must admit that he

is a most undesirable personage with whom to associate. Your Cousin Forest could not really have wished you to marry *him*?"

"But she did, Cousin Margery. She did indeed. That was the beginning and the ending of our dispute. At first I think she hesitated; he was not popular at Chilling Towers. Sir Francis was very much horrified at his habit of swearing, and at his trying to introduce *gambling* into the billiard-room. Then Lady Rosamund complained that he took liberties with the maids when he met them on the stairs and corridors; also he talked in a very immoral way, Sir Francis confided to his wife. He was actually disliked at the Towers, and I feel sure he will never be invited there again."

"And he had the presumption to pay his addresses to a young pure-minded girl? Did he actually *propose*?"

"He did, I am sorry to say. I soon saw what was in his head, for his admiration was expressed too broadly to be at all pleasant, or to be misunderstood. Dorothea Vanderquist warned me against him, for she knows of more than one case in which he had made proposals that were not *honourable*."

"He would not have dared to offer you such an insult!"

"Perhaps he would not; there could be no mistake as to his intentions. After I had avoided him persistently for some time, all but telling him that his attentions were unwelcome, and even fancied that he would trouble me no more,—I found out that he carried on a correspondence with Lady Forest, which she encouraged. And when I thought he was safe in Italy, he turned up at Bournemouth, where I was happy till he put in an appearance. He proposed *through* Lady Forest—so that she knew exactly what was passing. He offered splendid settlements, the family jewels, and what not; he would not be repulsed, and my cousin, as soon as she found that I was not to be persuaded, or coaxed, or threatened into sharing ducal honours, became seriously displeased. The crisis arrived three days ago—I had till to-day to make up my mind—marry the Duke whom I could not tolerate, or forfeit her favour and protection for ever. I did not wait till the appointed time,

which was *to-day*. I came very quickly to a decision, and in a few hours I resolved to fly to you, as I should have flown to my own mother had she lived. I knew you and Cousin Robert would give me shelter. So relying on your kindness and goodness I ventured to telegraph, for I wanted to be out of the house as fast as I could."

"And I am very glad, my dear, that you did so : it was the best and only thing to do. We have not a splendid home to offer you, and we do not consort with lords and ladies ; we are plain country people, and I am afraid life at the Abbey Mill must necessarily be rather dull to you, who have been accustomed to so much gaiety ; but such as we have we freely offer. We can give you every comfort, and perhaps a few luxuries, and we will never urge you to marry any one whom you do not regard with affection ; and, certainly, we never could or would tolerate the addresses of such a man to any one under our roof. If he followed you here, he would have a most unflattering reception."

"I do not think he will trouble me again. He did not care for me, really. He never was my *lover*, he was only my suitor. And oh, Cousin Margery, I am sick of the ways of the great world. Society, as it is called, is such a sham, such a miserable pretence. I never wish to return to it—it is such a rest to be with you again."

"All society, even in what you call the great world, my dear, is not a sham, I feel certain. There are good and noble people in every class of life, and discontent may be found in these rural solitudes, in thatched cottages, and peaceful-seeming homes, as well as in palaces and castles. My dear, we make our own happiness or unhappiness, our satisfaction or dissatisfaction."

"I am sure we do, and I have made my own misery. I did not understand Cousin Robert when he told me plainly that I might go on drawing waters from the world's cisterns all my days, and never be *satisfied*. He bade me come to Christ, and be at peace.'

"And are you coming, Clare ? "

"Yes, Cousin Margery, I am ; at least, I think I am."

And then Clare, half-hesitatingly and tearfully, told Mrs.

Darlington her experience of the day before—how she had mourned her vanished hopes, and sighed over her perpetual struggles after happiness. “If I could only be content, I thought, I would give up trying to be happy. Everything had failed me ; I had promised myself handfuls of roses—life’s roses, I mean ; but the flowers faded even as I gathered them, and nothing remained but the thorns that wounded me sorely. I felt so baffled, so weary, so empty-hearted, and I thought if I could only be *at peace*, so I prayed—‘Grant me Thy peace’ ;—and I do think I was answered.”

“I trust you were, my love. I am sure you were, if you asked in faith, earnestly desiring that peace which passeth understanding, and which the world can never know ; for God, who feeds the ravens when they cry to Him for food, will certainly give His blessed Spirit to those who ask Him. He gives to all men liberally and upbraideth not, you know. And, my dear, I am so glad, more than glad, that you listened to the pleading voice within, and sought the only peace that is not transitory.”

“Cousin, do you believe in sudden conversions ?”

“I scarcely know what to say, my dear ; sudden conversions are far from impossible, though I believe they are very rare.”

“And yet we often hear of so many people being ‘converted’ under certain preachings !”

“So we do ; but I think in such cases we should say *convicted*. For conviction is not conversion—conviction often becomes conversion, thank God ; but it very often means no more than being startled into short-lived penitence, and vague resolves to lead a better life. Conversion really means *turning*, I think. Years ago, when I was quite a young woman, I was in much distress of mind because I could not feel sure that I was *born again*—that is, converted. And my mother, who was alive then, said to me, emphatically,—she was a good Christian, but an homely old lady, with less education than I have had—‘Margery, lass, never bother thyself about how much thou believest, and how much thou doesn’t, and whether thou art *safe*. But ask which way thy face is turned? Art thou wanting to go

heavenward or earthward? if thou wert called to make thy choice now, would'st thou choose poverty and shame with the people of God, or riches and grandeur with those who are content to be sinners?' And when I began to reply, she said, 'Nay, don't answer me; ask thy own heart.' And I did ask my own heart, Clare, and I knew that I had chosen to throw in my lot with the people of God; my face was set Zionwards, and, His grace helping me, I would never turn back."

"I am so afraid that the peace that has come to me may fade away. I have so often fancied that now, at last, I should be happy; I thought I could never be tired of the life I led at Lowndes Square, during the first weeks of my stay. It was so light and pleasant, and in some sense *satisfying*."

"Only it could not abide; and there can be no pure pleasure in what dies with time; the joy we cannot carry with us through the gates of death is only a vain *mirage* that vanishes away, just as we think we are going to drink our fill of pleasant waters. Did you ever read that story of the desert, Clare? But of course you have."

"Yes, I know all that science teaches about the strange phenomenon of the *mirage*; but I never thought of it as an emblem of earthly joys, and yet how apt. Cousin, I do hope I have found Christ; I do mean to give myself to Him. But suppose I am mistaken? Suppose I go back to my old self, and dig other wells that can hold no living water?"

"You need not, my dear—you will not, if you trust in Him in whose gift is eternal life. You will be tried, doubtless—all Christians are; the world is very alluring, even after you have learned to know its deceits, and the enemy of souls is ever ready with his temptations; but never fear: there is One always able and willing to deliver you from every snare, and He who has begun a good work in you will, if you put your trust in Him, carry it on to the end, and perfect it at last."

"I think God sent me here last summer, Cousin Margery. He ordered my footsteps, as you would say, for I am not sure that I should even have really wished for God's peace

if I had not heard of it here, and seen with my own eyes the fruits of lives consecrated to the Lord."

"Thank God, my dear, for whatever you have learned in our household. Oh, child, it is a great thing to have given yourself heart and soul to God ; to be able to put by a thousand cares and fears, and say confidently, 'the Lord will provide ; I am Christ's, and He is mine, all *must* end well.' And it is so sweet to be joined in the same faith with your dear family, with husband and children ; to be of one spirit as I am with Robert, and with all my sons and daughters,—save Lina, who will some day, I trust, choose the better part ; and that before very long. And now that you are coming with us, and Philip too, we are almost an unbroken family. And the ties that are so sweet on earth will not be loosed in Heaven."

"Philip, did you say ?"

"Yes, the great change has come to Philip since you left us. He, too, has decided for God. I may tell Robert—I may tell them all, may I not, how happy you have made me? Then we can all rejoice together, and thank and praise Him who is the Spring and Source of it all. And we will all pray for dear little Lina, that she may be blessed, indeed ; will we not, my dear ? Those who have found the true peace are always anxious that others should find it too."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CLARE GROWS INDUSTRIOUS.

"How sweet it is—this pleasant, homely world !"

C LARE soon settled down again to the old, quiet family ways at the Mill, and she was astonished at the pleasure and interest she experienced in all that surrounded her. She no longer complained of dulness and monotony ; she began to find her recreation in varied but

continued employment ; and, best of all, she felt really at home with her cousins, and able to enter into the spirit of their life and conversation.

And as the spring developed its beauty, and flowers and leaves multiplied, she thought that no place could be lovelier than the solitudes she had once almost despised ; she began to like, and then to love, the deep murmur of the waters ; and she was fain to call the lovely flowing Allan "*our river*," as did the others ; and to talk of the hills that enclosed the peaceful valley as "*our own hills*."

She found, too, that Edith and Tessie, though passionately fond of flowers, really knew very little about them, and were delighted to learn something of real botany. An hour with Clare in the woods and fields was worth a week of the unsatisfactory study of past time, they both averred ; and as the season advanced, and floral treasures without number bloomed in their daily paths, and at their very feet, wherever they trod, the three girls began to conceive a perfect passion for this most healthful and delightful of sciences ; and they pursued the study of their favourite botany with a certain *furore* which youth only knows, and under advantages of the most exceptional character. Clare was sure that she had never before found so many rare specimens within a certain limit ; and she was so pleased to know that, within a given period, she would not, as had always heretofore happened, have to move on to another district, and undertake an entirely new *habitat*. So, as the evenings lengthened out, the cousins found an exquisite pleasure in extending their walks, and filling their tin plant-cases with specimens of various kinds, as many as the wild neighbourhood afforded, both ferns and flowers.

But botany was not the only study to which the "maids of the Mill" addressed themselves. Clare's "French" was perfect ; and the year before she had discovered for herself that her cousins' French, though not at all bad in itself, was sadly defective in many ways, pre-eminently so in accent ; it was, in fact, a French not known in Paris, and certain to expose them to endless disappointments, and some mortification, if they should ever cross the Channel, and essay to converse with the foreigners in their own language.

So a course of French reading was sedulously arranged, and Madeline at once became Clare's pupil for French; and they all studied Italian and German together, a little every day.

"For," as Tessie one day remarked, "I should never be surprised, Clare, if we had to turn our education to the best account, and go out as governesses, or take pupils at home, or something of that sort, for we do not get richer as the years roll on; but quite the contrary, I am afraid."

At which remark Clare could not but feel that she must be an extra expense in the household, and she doubted, as she had before, whether she was justified in remaining a dependant upon her Cousin Robert, who had five children of his own. And as she had of late got into the habit of speaking freely on all subjects with both the elder girls, she said as much.

Whereat Tessie replied, "You must not think of such a thing. You are invaluable to us now; we could not spare you again on any pretence, for you are doing us so much real good. Don't you see that, if we are to be governesses, we must be fitted for our office? Now, we know enough, I dare say, to enable us to pass muster in our own station of life; for miller's daughters, I suppose, we are rather accomplished and well-read. But if we are compelled to bring our talents into the labour market, I am afraid we shall be found sadly wanting. We know no language *thoroughly*, except our own; our playing is by no means first-rate; and our drawings are mere daubs. Now, you know so much that we do not, and you certainly have quite a gift for teaching. You got your French in Paris, and your German in Dresden, and you have read Dante and Tasso with Italian professors, and you are willing, as well as able, to give us what otherwise would not be within our reach. We could not for 'love or money,' as people say, obtain such a teacher as yourself, for there are very few masters even at Allan Bridge, and we are too old to go to school, to say nothing of expense. Mother was talking of sending Lina away for her education, for we felt we could not do her justice, as she is really clever, and might qualify herself for a first-class governess. But Lina pouted, and we all

disliked the idea of losing our pet, father especially. We were so thankful when you came to the rescue, and gave us the very thing we wanted."

"I am very glad, very thankful, that I can be of use. But I am afraid, Tessie, that you exaggerate my poor services."

"No, I do not. We had serious talks before you came back from London of making some kind of change in the schoolroom. Both Edith and I felt that something more might be done with Lina, if she had but proper advantages, and we did so much wish to improve our own French and Italian. German is our best acquirement ; we are not so very far behind you in pronunciation, though we are sadly deficient in grammar and in fluency of speech. We will do our best to learn all that you can teach us, if you will go on to take the trouble. And the expense of a boarding-school for Lina may be altogether saved."

"I am quite content to remain governess if you really wish it. And of course I am good at languages, through having lived abroad so much. But, Tessie, is it at all probable that you may have to turn out to earn money, you girls?"

"It is by no means improbable ; mother and Edie and I have talked it over together several times, and I will tell you *why*. The Mill does not pay as it did years ago ; labour is more expensive, father says, and profits are not so good. The father and the grandfather, too, you know, and I believe their fathers before them, had their own especial connection in the county, and they had their regular customers always ; but now times are changed—many old friends and neighbours are dead, or gone away, some quite out of the country ; and their children, who have taken their place, are no longer to be relied on, and they do business in another way. Father says he supposes he has not 'kept up with the times,' and this is an age in which a man *must* put his best foot foremost, or be pushed out of the road. Competition is keen, it is *cruel* ; even mother complains, and it is not so easy to do business in an honourable, Christian fashion, as it was in the old days when she was a girl. But one thing is certain—our dear father would never purchase one atom of success, or try to divert failure, by the slightest departure from honesty

or fairness. He will *never* conclude a bargain on which he cannot ask the Lord's blessing."

"I am sure of that. I knew Cousin Robert for an incorruptible, honest man in heart and soul, before I had been a week in the same house with him. I wish there were more such true men in the world, for the world's sake. But then there is the farm?"

"And that is nothing like as profitable as it once used to be. These are not good times for farmers ; so far from amassing fortunes, they must be thankful to make both ends meet, I am often told. But that Philip has money of his own, and is able to purchase machinery and stock, the father would find it difficult, if not impossible, to carry on the farm, I am persuaded. I think Philip would sacrifice his last five pounds before he would let his work, which he loves, fail for the want of it. Philip loves high farming, and he does understand what he is about, father says, and never spares himself in any way."

And here the conversation ended, but Clare often thought both Cousin Robert and his wife looked depressed, and she understood from time to time that they suffered much from anxiety. The promise of harvest was not good ; and there was much reason to fear that the hay-crop would be, to say the best of it, a partial failure.

Miss Argles, she was glad to know, had found a comfortable and most suitable situation as "assistant matron" in a large boys' school, about thirty miles away from Duston. She had not much to do besides plain sewing, chiefly mending, which she could manage very well, and sometimes assisting the housekeeper and looking after invalids—occupations in which she seemed to find increasing satisfaction.

One day, something occurred that a little astonished Clare. She had written to Mrs. Tarleton, according to promise, a day or two after her safe arrival at the Abbey Mill ; but she had received no answer to her letter, nor indeed had she expected one. She knew very well that Tarleton was "no scribe," and that her time was so fully occupied she had little leisure for correspondence. Great, therefore, was her surprise when, one bright May day, as

she was sitting under the great hawthorn dictating a French lesson to Lina, some one brought her a thick, clumsy-looking letter, just arrived by post.

She was so much puzzled to determine who her unknown correspondent could be, that she opened the envelope at once, and ascertained at a glance that it contained a lengthy epistle from Mrs. Tarleton. When Lina had finished, and carried off her exercise-books, Clare set herself to peruse the unlooked-for document.

The letter began in the usual formal way; and, with a great deal of circumlocution, Tarleton hoped her dear Miss Darlington was quite well, as both she and Mr. Weller were, at present. After a good deal of not very comprehensible preface, the good woman went on to say: "But the chief thing I have to tell you is, that about a week ago my lady called me to her, and informed me that she had been upstairs into the 'pink room,' that you, Miss Clare, did use to have while you was in Lowndes Square; and, looking quite by accident into the wardrobe, had seen your beautiful dresses hanging up, and others lying on the shelves, neatly folded up. She wanted to know what was the meaning of them being there, when she had desired you to be off 'pack and package' to which I made reply that you had left them behind, as you could not assume that they were your own. Them was your very words, if you remember, Miss Clare; and I repeated them to my lady. Then a good deal passed between us that needn't be written down, for it's neither here nor there; but I made bold to assure my lady that you had not left them behind you *because*, as she would have it, you meant to come back again when you had coaxed her over. I told her that nothing of the sort was in your mind, and that you thought you had no right to some of them, as they was given to you under a sort of mistake; especially that lovely black and silver costume that was meant to set you off in the Dook's eyes."

"Well, Miss. Clare, we had a regular jangle, for my lady was shocking cross, and I wasn't by no means in the sweetest of tempers myself. After a while, I got away, and I told Mr. Weller and Mrs. Goswell, the house-keeper, that I didn't think I *could* put up with her lady-

ship much longer. She was sulky that night, and would not say a word hardly ; but next day, when she had been talking to Scotton, the new page, that Mr. Weller and me can't abide, she sent to bid me wait upon her in her *boudore*, which, as you know, she commonly keeps in when she's got the black dog badly on her shoulder.

"I went, of course, wondering what might be in the wind now ; and as I entered she burst out, ' Tarleton, gather together everything that Miss Darlington has left behind her—*everythink*, mind ! then send out for some stout wooden cases, if there are none to spare in the house, and take every article of clothing, and every bit of lace, and every ornament, except the best pearl necklace that once belonged to *my* jewel-case, and pack them up carefully, and direct them to "Miss Clare Darlington, The Abbey Mill, Duston, Moorlandshire," then charge Weller to see them off by rail.' 'And shall I write to Miss Clare, letting her know what your will and pleasure is, my lady ?' says I ; and she snapped me up with a '*No !*' that almost took my breath away. But presently—that same evening—she said, 'Write to that ungrateful girl, if you like ; *but not from me*. The things won't be much good to her, I fancy, in that out-of-the-way place ; she can throw them in the river, if she likes, or give them to the poor, but I won't have them *here*. I daresay she is pining to come back again by this time, for she's no fonder of the gaping rustics at heart than I am. But *my* door is shut against her for ever and for ever.'

"So, Miss Clare, I did as I was bid ; I got two big square boxes, and packed up, as carefully as ever I packed anything in my life, every mortal thing that you left behind ; and Weller, he fastened them up, safe and sound, and copied your address, and wrote it fairly on the cases, and saw them off by rail with his own eyes. And they are *carriage-paid*, I was to tell you ; and we both hopes you will receive them safely and in good condition.

"And now, my dear Miss Clare, that's all about business ; but I must make bold to tell you a little bit of news on my own account. Weller and me have made up our minds to get married, for we're tired out, both of us, of being scolded and nagged at by what he calls a '*Zantippe*'

whatever that is ! but I reckon it's the same as a *vixen*, or a *virago*. And the house hasn't seemed the same since you went away, and the deadness and dulness isn't to be borne by flesh and blood, and Mrs. Goswell is going to retire from service. And we all of us detest that young monkey Scotton, whom my lady has taken it into her silly head to make much of till he's that set-up he want's a good sound thrashing, which I hope Weller will give him before we make our *exit*, as the play says.

"I shall go to my sister-in-law, as lives in Whitechapel, and keeps a little pork-butcher's and tripe-shop, and I shall be married from there ; for Mrs. Job Tarleton is highly respectable and well-to-do, though she is a widow and in the pork and tripe trade. Weller is looking out for a nice little greengrocer's shop, and he has just heard of a good, snug business that is to be disposed of, at the West-end, *of course*, —for I couldn't, after all these years, bring myself to live at the East-end, or in the City, which may be quite respectable, but ain't *aristocratick*. So no more at present, my dear Miss Clare, from your obedient servant, TABITHA TARLETON."

"P.S.—I sent the boxes off the day before yesterday. Weller desires his dooty. We haven't either of us seen the Dook's face, nor heard the sound of his name, since that Toosday you gave him his answer, and sent him off."

In much amazement, Clare read and re-read the long, homely, though kindly epistle, and wondered what she was to do with her new possessions when they came ; for the ball dresses, and some of the other most *recherché* things, would certainly be quite useless to her at the Abbey Mill. She went in and showed her cousins the letter, which very much amused them ; the next day the cases appeared, together with a load of grain, which the miller was fidgeting about, as being overdue.

And what an unpacking that was ! Neither Cousin Margery, nor her daughters, had ever seen such wonderful dresses in their lives. As for Madeline, she was fairly enraptured at the sight of so much elegant finery. She was made very happy, when Clare insisted on presenting her with a pretty light plaid silk, that was not at all unsuitable

for a schoolgirl, and that would require very little alteration. There were other things that she could very well distribute among her cousins ; a lace pelerine to Edith, a cashmere shawl to Tessie, and a rich silk, of the then new shade called *Reseda*, to Cousin Margery. The black dress, with the silver fringe, *might* be useful on some future grand occasion, she told herself, and she carefully put it away in an unoccupied drawer, in the spare room. As for the mess of things that remained—silks, satins, flowers, laces, and millinery of every description, she puzzled her brains to know what could be done with them ; put by they would spoil, or lose their freshness, as well as become old-fashioned. To wear them was impossible—they would be utterly out of place on herself or on her cousins ; while to adapt them to present circumstances, so as to be of any real service, seemed next to impossible.

The ladies held a solemn cabinet council over Clare's unexpected and really unwished-for fortune, in the way of fashionable array, "Shall we dig a deep hole and bury it all ?" said Clare at last ; "whatever can be in any way utilised we will keep—certainly, lace, embroidery, and unmade material can generally be turned to some good account ; though, except lace, they are always the worse for keeping. Suppose you took out all you liked, Cousin Margery, while we buried or burned the rest ?"

"Oh, what a dreadful thing to burn such lovely gauzes, and tulles, and blondes !" cried Madeline. "It is almost wicked, such a *waste*."

And even Tessie whispered softly and regretfully, "It will be a sad waste, Clare dear."

But Clare answered, "No more of a waste than shutting them up where they can never be of service to any one. They will certainly be given over to moth and mildew if we stow them away, and they will take up so much space in any of the inhabited rooms."

"But, Clare," interposed Edith, "they might be kept carefully for a while ; and suppose you wanted to go to balls and operas again ?"

"I *may* want to go to balls and operas again some day—a good opera is always a temptation. But I have lost my

taste, or it seems so now, for so many of the amusements in which I used to delight. I suppose when one is not rationally satisfied, one gets *satiated*. I thought I should never tire of dancing, but I did ; and as for going to the theatre three or four times a week, you can't think how it palls upon one. And *cards*, oh, dear me, Edie ! I am quite ready now to endorse your judgment on them ; one must be in a very bad way when one plays game after game, just '*pour passer le temps.*' Oh, how sick I was of that tiresome *bézique* ! I used to declare 'marriages' and 'royal marriages' night after night, till I felt as if I were on the road to idiocy."

"You have had a surfeit of playing cards ?"

"That I have, and I should not care if I never saw another pack to the day of my death. I could not even *murder time* with them at last. They made the evening pass so heavily. But we are getting away from the superfluous finery—*may* we bury it or burn it, Cousin Margery ? I feel reproached every time I look at it."

"My dear," returned Cousin Margery, "I have a brilliant idea, an inspiration. We will *sell it*."

"Sell it ?" echoed all the voices, while Clare added "To whom ? Who will buy it ? Who will undertake to be the vendor ?"

"I will," replied Mrs. Darlington. "I know of a person who buys ladies' left-off clothing. Suppose we purchase material with the money so obtained for our clothing-society for next winter. There has been a great deal of distress in the villages beyond Doniston and Lingthorpe Mere. I will undertake the selling part if you like my plan."

"It is the very thing," said Clare, "that will be, indeed, turning useless lumber to good account. I shall be so glad to know that it is rationally and even meritoriously disposed of."

In due time Clare's useless finery was sent away, and, in the course of the summer, Mrs. Darlington received for it a cheque for £5—not the value of the goods, certainly, but quite enough to buy calico, flannel, &c., to what seemed a most amazing extent.

CHAPTER XXIX.

“ FROM A LONDON SUBURB.”

“ Dreams; books are each a world ; and books we know
Are a substantial world, both pure and good ;
Round these, with tendrils strong as flesh and blood,
Our pastime and our happiness will grow.”

“ ARE those *exercises*, Clare ? ” asked Lina, one afternoon, when, looking in upon the shady schoolroom about an hour after lessons were over, she found her cousin still seated where she had left her, writing away “ as if for very life,” she said afterwards, when the sisters together talked over the discovery that had been made.

“ No, dear, they are not exercises,” replied Clare, absently. “ Do not talk to me, please ; I have some thoughts in my head that I do not wish to put out of it.”

“ Then you are writing *a book*. I have fancied for the last few days, oh, for ever so long, that it was *that* which kept you at your desk so much. What is it all about, Clare ; do tell me ? ”

“ I am not writing a book, Lina ; at least, not exactly a book ; but I shall feel so much obliged if you will go away just now, for your talking disturbs me. I want to finish a certain number of pages before tea-time. Edith and I are going to Duston this evening, if it does not rain.”

But it did rain, and Clare continued her writing—her “ scribbling,” Lina called it—till almost supper-time, and Edith and Tessie were informed by their young sister that she had found out Clare’s secret at last ; she was writing a book, and wanted nobody to know about it.”

“ Then why do you tell us ? ” asked Edith, reprovingly.

“ Oh, well—*why* ? She never *told* me her secret, I only found it out ; and where there is no confidence, you know, there cannot be any to betray. There is not much fun in finding the answer to a riddle, and never saying a word

about it. Now, I like discussing a mystery ; and Clare, when she——”

“ Hush, Lina,” said Edith, gently, but imperatively ; “ if Clare has a secret she has a perfect right to one, or to twenty if she chooses. And we have no business to try and find it out, or to talk it over between ourselves ; I think I know what it is, and I dare say we shall all be told in due time. It is not ladylike—it is not nice, Lina, dear, to be inquisitive, or to meddle with what does not concern you.”

At which gentle reproof Miss Lina retired in high dudgeon. It must be conceded that the young lady was a little spoilt ; she was the youngest of eight children, three of whom were in their quiet graves, and Lina, who had caused her parents much anxiety during her delicate infancy, was still accounted “ the baby,” and “ our little darling,” though now she was a fine, robust maiden of fifteen. Perhaps the whole family had a share in the spoiling process to which the youngest member of it was certainly exposed ; her father and mother, remembering their hours of solicitude over her cradle, and the early death of the two little sisters and the brother, who were her juniors, petted her rather too much. The sisters followed suit till the brothers remonstrated, and Philip declared that they were all doing their best to make poor little Lina “ a regular nuisance.”

Edith and Tessie, however, both pleaded that she would grow wiser as she grew older ; her temper would improve ; she would think less of herself ; and her childish pertness would disappear. But the brothers rejoiced to discover that Clare was quite able to hold her own in the matter of schoolroom discipline ; so perhaps, after all, the oft-repeated threat of sending the household pet away to school would not have to be carried into execution.

As it happened, the mystery of Clare’s devotion to pen and ink was fully explained on the following day. When Philip came home to dinner he took from his pocket the current number of the *Grosvenor Magazine*, for the detention of which he humbly apologised.

“ You see, Clare,” he said, “ I met our old postman as he was hobbling across the High Croft this morning, and, of

course, he unfastened his bag as soon as he saw me in order to deliver my share of the contents. A letter for myself, and this magazine for you, were all he had for the Abbey Mill ; so I offered to take charge of the magazine to save the poor old fellow an extra half mile. If he crossed over, straight into Hazel Lane, you know, he would very quickly reach the people at Duston end. And now comes the real confession, Clare. After I had read my one epistle, which was nothing more than a business memorandum, I had the temerity to withdraw the *Grosvenor* from its wrapper and inspect its contents ; and I was so interested in what I read, that, I am ashamed to say, I read it nearly all through, and quite forgot that I had promised to meet Dan Scatter good in the great barn at twelve o'clock precisely. I hope you will not withhold your forgiveness. I am quite ready to cry *peccavi*."

“ I think it is Dan Scattergood who ought to grant you absolution,” she replied, as with heightened colour she took the familiar-looking serial from Philip’s hand, scarcely daring to glance at the “table of contents” on the cover, to see if the last instalment of her own tale was there. It was there, however ; and Clare knew that at the quarter, and it was only three weeks off, she would be receiving the payment due. It would be the first money she had ever really earned in her life ; and the *cheque*, though by no means a large one, would seem to her quite a mine of wealth, and it would be, she fervently hoped, the first fruits of a large and profitable harvest in the days to come.

Oh, how she wished she could fly to her dear father, and prove to him that she inherited just a *minimum* of his own talent for authorship ! Her next desire was that the cheque might be in her possession directly—it was so long till Midsummer Day ; and she could not be at all sure that Messrs. Grey and Co. settled their accounts punctually to the hour. She was *sure*, however, of the money, and that was something ; and, come when it would, it would be most acceptable. She determined still to preserve her secret ; but after Philip was gone she felt that, in her present state of elate complacency, it would certainly ooze out before this Midsummer cheque was in her possession. She had quite meant

to produce the results of her authorship when she openly avowed it, and not till then ; but she quickly came to the conclusion that her confession had better not be deferred. Naturally, she was proud of her first success, and she wanted some one with whom to share her intense satisfaction ; it would be much more dignified, too, to make her communication fully and at once, she thought, than casually to awake suspicion—or perhaps, in an unlucky moment, weakly to succumb to her pupil's inquisitive pertinacity. She would tell Cousin Margery and the girls at once, and without any reserve, what she was doing, and, further still, what she was emulous of doing.

So, when another wet evening forbade the usual walk, and all were collected in the library, intending to sew or draw, while one of the number read aloud, Clare felt that she might not find a better opportunity than the present. Cousin Margery could tell her husband, and "the girls" could tell "the boys."

The subject she wished to discuss, yet could not make up her mind to open *à propos* of nothing, was very quickly introduced. The question arose as to what they should *read* on this occasion, when the rain fell so steadily, and the roads were already so wet that there was very little probability of being able to leave the house before dark. "Is there anything in your *Grosvenor Magazine* ?" asked Cousin Margery. "I mean anything that is not a continued tale, which, of course, we should have to commence from the first chapter ; there are generally some good articles—what Philip calls 'self-contained articles,' in the *Grosvenor*, I think ?"

"Yes, there is one on 'Canadian Emigration' that seems interesting," replied Clare, slowly. "Also, there is a chapter on 'Natural Selection' ; and a rather exhaustive paper on 'Carlyle's Frederick the Great.' But that seems extremely dry—only there are so many German phrases in it, that we should be driven continually to our dictionaries ; and that would be improving."

"It would be horribly dry and stupid !" cried Lina. "I have been improving my mind ever since nine o'clock this morning, with very little intermission, and now I want to be amused. Let us have a good story."

“There is one which runs through three numbers only, and finishes in this one,” said Edith, gravely. “We could get through that very well before supper-time ; shall Tessie or I be lecturer, or will you, Clare? or shall we take it in turns?”

But Tessie interposed. “Oh, yes ! do let us read that, *please!* You mean ‘From a London Suburb.’ It is charming ; at least the earlier chapters are, and I have no doubt it ends well. I hate novels that end badly, don’t you, Clare? I have not read the conclusion, for which I have been longing ever since I laid down the May number ; and I do not in the least mind going over the commencement again. Which of us shall begin, mother? Lina, get all your silks together at once, and everything else that you may require, for we shall not care to be interrupted.”

But Clare could not stand that ; she certainly could not take her share of reading aloud her own composition. She turned scarlet as Tessie put the book into her hand, and asked if the two preceding numbers were in her room. She felt that she looked as guilty as if she had been detected in stealing the *Grosvenor Magazine* ; or, at least, convicted of flagrant plagiarism.

Mrs. Darlington looked at her with some surprise, and not a little uneasiness. She feared that something had been said inadvertently to wound Clare’s feelings, though what the vulnerable point might be she could not remotely guess. Edith and Tessie, however, who had been rather more intimately associated with Clare, and had observed her proceedings with silent but intense curiosity, caught a glimmering of the truth ; while Lina, who always spoke without hesitation whatever came uppermost, exclaimed, “I do believe she wrote that very story ! Clare, *you* are the author of ‘From a London Suburb,’ are you not? Come, ‘fess, ‘fess,’ as Miss Ophelia would say.”

No one, except Mrs. Darlington, who had not read a word of the *Grosvenor Magazine*, and never dreamed of authorship existing under her own quiet roof, was greatly astonished. Lina, of course, had “guessed it all along.” Both Edith and Tessie had formed their own conjectures, especially Edith, who about a fortnight ago had

come suddenly upon Clare in her own room, when she was supposed to be asleep, and discovered her in the act of scribbling away on what looked very much like manuscript paper ; while, at the same moment, she seized several loose sheets and *hid* them in her blotting-case, as though they were something of the most contraband nature.

But their admiration of Clare's genius was genuine and unanimous ; and "How clever you must be !" "However did you come to think of it ?" "I wonder how people feel when they are writing stories !" resounded on all sides. And then commenced the cross-examination that was inevitable. "What *did* make you think of writing for the *Grosvenor*, in the first instance ?" asked Tessie.

Clare told the story of her first literary attempts in Kilmarnock Gardens ; she described her earliest ambition, which was to produce a three-volume novel, that was to be begun and finished off-hand, and published anonymously, as "*Evelina*" was published ; the secret of the true authorship to be divulged only when the book had become the rage of the season, and was being read by everybody, and clamoured for at all the circulating libraries. Then she confessed how very difficult she quickly discovered the task to be which she had so lightly undertaken ; how very soon she failed to satisfy herself ; how many mistakes she made ; how terrible was her sense of incapacity when she had written a very few pages. "So with many tears," she continued, "I decided to give up my novel, and try something a little less ambitious. I had to confess that I was not a Fanny Burney, *nor* a Charlotte Brontë. I could not frame my *plot* to please myself ; I was always violating that grand old rule of *Lindley Murray*, which tells us that 'all the parts of a sentence must correspond with each other.' I was continually finding out that I could not write *faultless* English, as one to the manner born, so I lost heart ; and when I had consumed about a ream of paper, with the most inadequate and unsatisfactory results, I came slowly and reluctantly to the humiliating conviction that I should never make a popular author."

"Ah, but I think you will," interrupted Tessie. "That story in nine chapters, 'From a London Suburb,' is simply

delightful. If you were the most perfect stranger to me, Clare, I assure you I should begin at once to take in the *Grosvenor*, on the chance of its containing future contributions of yours.”

“ You are too partial, Tessie,” replied the grateful girl. “ I only hope a great many more people may share your sentiments. Well, let me continue my literary reminiscences.”

“ Yes, go on, my dear,” said Cousin Margery ; “ I am so glad you did not allow yourself to be totally discouraged ; there is nothing like steady perseverance and unflinching determination when once you have set a certain aim before you.”

“ Yes, go on, pray go on,” cried all the three girls in chorus ; while Lina remarked, “ It is almost as good as a novel, to hear the history of the novel. Now for the story of the story ! ”

“ Of the *storiette*, for it is hardly important enough to take rank as a proper serial. You see, I was very reluctant to relinquish the hope that had buoyed me up through many days of weariness and sadness. There was a good deal of my dear father in me, I knew ; and I thought it just possible that I might inherit a *little* of his talent. So I resolved on another trial. The new life I was leading in North Tyburnia gave me the germs of my unambitious tale—and I began it, I must say, with no very definite idea of the manner of its ending. I had plenty of leisure, and I threw myself into my new endeavour *con amore*, and in process of time—a longer time than I had expected—I came to the last page of ‘ From a London Suburb.’ ”

“ And you succeeded, for here is your endeavour *in print.*”

“ Not immediately. My trials were not over when I had, with mingled hopes and fears, consigned my precious venture to one of the best publishing firms in London, for I was overwhelmed with misgivings that, too quickly, proved themselves to be prophetic. In a few days—rather more than a week—I was delivered at least from *suspense*. My unfortunate MS. was returned, with the very briefest and simplest indication of its fate ; ‘ *Declined with thanks*,’ was

roughly pencilled on the outside. Moreover, it was numbered on the title page '27,381.' So, I suppose, the editor had received previously, within a certain period, 27,380 other contributions."

"Oh, what a cruel, *cruel* disappointment! I have always heard that publishers are *relentlessly* cruel, and I am sure editors have stony hearts; most certainly that one had."

"It does not follow. Editors and publishers *must* take the best they can get for their money, and they can only take a limited quantity of 'copy,' as they call accepted MS. I should not have succeeded with the *Grosvenor* people had it not providentially occurred that there were several vacancies in the *staff*, or circle of regular accredited contributors. They had had the MS. almost ten months when they accepted it, and I never expected to hear of it any more. But Mr. Christopher Grey tells me that the market is literally overstocked; it would be impossible to publish one quarter, or even a one-tenth part, of what is submitted to their firm. It is sometimes *months* before even a promising-looking MS. can be properly considered; there is always so much *accepted* matter awaiting its turn to go to press."

"Young authors must want plenty of patience."

"If they lack patience they have but very poor chances, I can see—even the best of them. As it happened, some of the old contributors suddenly failed the editor of the *Grosvenor*; he wanted a short story of a certain calibre—mine was then awaiting its turn; it was pleasantly surprising, he wrote, to find that 'From a London Suburb' was exactly suitable; it was the right sort of story and of just the right length. It was printed and published before I knew that its fate was decided."

"And when did that happen?"

"Only in April last, just before I left Lowndes Square. The first three chapters, you know, appear in the April number, the next three in May, the last three in the current issue."

"How delighted you must have been," said Lina, who was evidently much impressed. "And does it really bring you in *money*?"

“ Yes, I am paid for my work, of course. Though some beginners, I am told, are only too thankful to appear in print *gratis*, for the sake of a name, which may enable them to put their feet on the lowest rungs of the literary ladder. Publishers, as a rule, are shy of unknown aspirants.”

“ And no wonder, if the aspirants are so numerous ; and,” continued Edith, with some hesitation, “ would it be impertinent to ask how much is given, say, for such a story as yours ? ”

Clare told them, and they were undecided whether to be delighted or disappointed. Never having mixed in any kind of literary society, they had rather a wild idea of the vast fortunes that authors are sometimes supposed to accumulate ; on the other hand the very satisfactory sum that Clare named was far from despicable ; and then she was, as she begged them to remember, a mere *tyro* in the ranks. For a first, for an *early*, contribution her remuneration was liberal.

“ And Mr. Grey told me,” she continued, “ that I owed my immediate success to the fact that I did not ‘ *clamour* ’ —that was his own word—to know what had become of my beloved MS. If I had, he said, they were so overstocked that I should have received my packt back again, *unread*, by the very next post. They had literally not had time to look at it ; till there occurred a sudden *hiatus* there was not any possibility of using it. Patience and modesty are virtues that very often succeed, I fancy, if one can only make up one’s mind to cultivate them.”

“ Provided patience has something of real worth to be patient about. What becomes of the rubbish ? ”

“ Ah, that I do not know,” said Clare very gravely. “ I am only, as I said, a tyro—a neophyte ;—though Mr. Grey has been extremely good to me, and written me the most friendly letters. But I am not one of the initiated ; I only know that there is a dreadful institution in editorial offices called the ‘ *waste-basket* ’ ! What becomes of its contents it is wiser not to conjecture ; but my father used to say that every editor has his ‘ Betty,’ who lights the fires, and never has to complain of want of kindling.”

"But you are writing another story, are you not?" asked Edith. "You might have been composing a surreptitious love-letter when I intruded upon you the other night, thinking you must be asleep, and I could get into your room without disturbing you. It had a very suspicious face I can tell you; but I guessed—I guessed."

"I thought you would at the time, and I had a great mind to give you a hint. However, I am very glad the murder is out, and I can go about my work openly; I have no fancy for secrets, even innocent ones; I am not fond of the *sub-rosâ*. Mysteries are always landing one in difficulties. Now, Cousin Margery, you must tell Cousin Robert all about it, and there will be an end of it."

"An end of the mystery certainly," said Tessie; "but I hope not an end of the story-writing. Have you almost finished what you are about now?"

"Almost; I have only the winding up to do—the concluding chapters. This time, it is not so entirely a venture; for Mr. Grey was good enough to say that another tale of the same kind, and about twice as long, would be acceptable, if they could have the MS. before the middle of next month. And I shall be able quite easily to finish it in another week."

"And now let us read the story from the very beginning," cried Tessie. "You, mother, have not heard or seen a word of it—I am only anxious for the *dénouement*; I have read the April and May numbers of the *Grosvenor*, little thinking our demure Cousin Clare was the authoress. Oh, Clare, my dear, I am proud of you; for I, too, am a Darlington."

And then the reading commenced; and now that Clare had disburdened her mind of the secret that had pressed so heavily upon her for many months, she was quite willing to become her own interpreter. The last rays of the June twilight were fading fast, when Tessie—who had taken the book from her cousin when her voice failed her—went to the window, that the dying light of the dusky evening might fall upon the closing page.

There was a burst of acclamation when she had ended, and everybody paid her tribute of praise so heartily and

so simultaneously, that the loud hum of voices attracted Mr. Darlington, who was wondering what kept his woman-kind in the unlighted library so long. He had rung for the lamps, and was reading his newspaper, when such a sound of acclaim reached him, that he felt fairly roused, and set out to discover for himself what “mother” and the girls were “up to.” As everybody save Clare began talking all at once, he found some little difficulty in solving the problem that had brought him from his snug arm-chair. When, at length, he did understand, he was profoundly impressed, and signified his intention of reading the story for himself that very night, even if he did not get to bed till twelve o’clock.

Before supper was over, the “boys” knew all about it, of course. Dick and Ralph professed themselves “*astonished!*” Philip, however, was “not at all surprised,” —he had read the story from beginning to end, and, as he read, he said he seemed to be listening to Clare herself. She had put her soul—her very *self*—into her pages; the tale was full of life; it could not have been written by a person of *mediocre* intellect or cultivation. It was the very best thing he had met with for a long time; he should take in a *Grosvenor* for himself, henceforth. Mr. Christopher Grey was no doubt a very discerning editor; but he might think himself marvellously lucky in securing a contributor who *could* write “From a London Suburb.”

Altogether, Clare felt that she had had a happy day—one of the happiest she had experienced since her father’s death. Mr. Darlington, as he gave her the good-night kiss, which she shared now always with his own daughters, said solemnly, while he looked up from the pages of that wonderful *Grosvenor*, “Remember, my darling, it is a gift, a rare gift—a talent which God has committed to your care. Let it be consecrated to *Him*.”

CHAPTER XXX.

PHILIP SURPRISES CLARE.

“ He sendeth sun, He sendeth shower,
Alike they’re needful for the flower ;
And joys and tears alike are sent
To give the soul fit nourishment :
As comes to me, or cloud, or sun,
Father, Thy will, not mine, be done.”

C LARE found abundant leisure for literary employment as the weeks went on ; the promise of the smiling spring was unfulfilled. April had maintained its orthodoxy by being exceptionally showery, and May had been, on the whole, rather “ a dropping month.” There were some lovely days in June, alternated, however, with what the miller called “ spells of bad weather ” ; and the first attempt at getting in the hay seemed the signal for the windows of heaven to be opened, and such a rainfall as July had very seldom witnessed.

The girls could not take their usual walks ; the wood-paths were damp and miry, the lanes were ankle-deep in mud in some places, the long unmown grass added to the difficulties of those pedestrians who insisted on turning out, whenever there was the ghost of an opportunity, just for the sake of a “ constitutional.” The botanising expeditions which the Darlington girls had promised themselves had, for the most part, to be abandoned ; a few familiar flowers on the banks of the high roads, and a number of *weeds* that were so obliging as to spring up within the confines of their own grounds, were about all the specimens they were able to secure.

“ But it’s an ill wind that doesn’t blow any one good ! ” said Clare, at the close of a hopelessly wet evening that had followed a bright but rather *gleamy* morning, greatly to the disappointment of Lina, who had been promised some kind of enjoyable expedition, and was now prevented by the rain.

"The wind that blows incessant rain, rain, *rain*, cannot be good for any one," replied Lina, fretfully. "There are the waters out in many places that are our regular summer haunts ; when we do venture out-of-doors we must be armed with umbrellas and waterproofs, and as often as not we are driven back by one of those heavy showers that are sure to come on just as we are beginning to enjoy ourselves. Yesterday, when we thought all was safe for at least a couple of hours, it began to pour before we got to the end of Ripley Lane, where there was no possibility of shelter ; and then the moment we were within sight of home out popped the sun, and away went the clouds, while we had to hurry in and change our wet things, and—*grumble*."

"Speak for yourself, Lina," said Tessie, brightly. "I must say I heard no other grumbling than yours. What is the use of being cross ? All the ill-temper in the world cannot alter the state of the barometer. Besides, it is not right to speak so impatiently."

"Ralph as good as said I was *wicked* yesterday because I talked of writing to the 'clerk of the weather.' It was only a joke, and there is no harm in a joke ; is there, Edie?"

"My dear," replied Edith, "the harm of a joke often depends upon the way in which it is uttered ; and you were certainly very flippant yesterday, as well as very cross. You forget *who* controls the weather ; God holds the winds and the waters in His hands as well as the sunshine and the pleasant breezes. Remember, *He* can and does bring good out of evil continually. This uncomfortable weather may be a blessing in disguise."

"Well, I would rather blessings came in their own character. How *can* this wet season be a blessing, just as everybody wants to get their hay in ? Why, I heard Dick saying it was pretty nearly spoilt already ; and the Standridges were complaining that both their river meadows were under water, and that the hay had all floated away with the current, and was lost. Not that it mattered much, for a month of fine days now would not make it worth stacking. How *can* a good thing come out of a bad thing ? Clare, I think you are the wisest among us : tell us, please,

in what way this present pluvial dispensation is likely to be turned into a blessing."

"I am not learned enough to answer you satisfactorily," returned Clare. "I can only fall back upon my faith in God, who assures me that He will always do that which is the very best for His children ; and that *something* good—I am not wise enough to say what—will come out of this trouble of the rain. But I fancy I can see now what are often called 'judgments' may be turned even to our temporal profit. God expects man always to do his utmost ; and I should say it is quite possible that He sends such troubles very often that men may be roused from their dull content, their inventive faculties quickened, and their rational powers displayed. I dare say it would have been very difficult to convince the Londoners of 1666—I believe that is the right date—that the great fire that burned down their city, and destroyed their property, and drove them nearly out of their wits—that so great a calamity could ever be a blessing."

"Very likely ; and it is rather difficult to see how good *could* have come of it. Though it must have been a grand sight for those whose lives and goods were not in danger. Where did the blessing come from ? "

"Straight from God, who permitted the fire to do His work ; and I am almost sure nothing short of such a fire could have done what was wanted. God does not work overt miracles, when the forces of Nature can be turned to His purposes."

"I do not think I understand."

"Nor I, either," interposed Tessie. "What *good* did the great fire do ? "

"It burnt out the loathsome haunts of the Plague which had never entirely disappeared from London, and which might be lingering there to this day, a continual visitation, had not the whole place been *purified* by fire. Fire is always a purifier, you know, although it consumes. Houses in that day seemed to be built for the very purpose of harbouring disease. Nobody thought of having windows to open and shut ; ventilation was held of no account ; there were dark airless nooks and corners everywhere. The new

city that sprang from the ashes of the old was wonderfully improved, and the infection that must have lurked in old timbers and plaster, and even in rich velvets and tapestries, was burnt out of existence."

"Did not people think it was God's righteous judgment on the wickedness of that time?"

"Some of them did, no doubt, and they were *right*. God did mean, I suppose, to show His displeasure against those who were living with no thought of Him, and finding their pleasure in doing evil, revelling in profligacy and luxury, persecuting the pious, and oppressing the poor. But I think when people talk about *judgments*, they think God is such an One as themselves, ever ready to take vengeance on the sinners and rebels who set Him at defiance. I read the other day, while the best of earthly fathers may lose their tempers, and punish severely simply because they are much incensed, the *Heavenly Father*, though He may see fit to punish very severely, never loses sight of the end to be attained—viz., man's restoration to goodness and conformity to His own image. God's punishments are *corrections*; His chastenings are discipline; and I do believe—though it is only of late that I have thought so—that every affliction, national as well as individual, is meant for man's earthly as well as spiritual good."

"Philip was saying the other day, *apropos* of those open drains at Allan Bridge, that we shall never be free from contagious diseases of one sort or another till we cultivate more popularly what he calls *sanitary science*. And then people complain that *God* has sent a plague of fever, or small pox, or cholera, or whatever the epidemic may be."

"Rather, I should say, He permits them to come, as warnings of worse that may be, if His laws of health are set at defiance. It seems to me that all God's so-called judgments are meant to be *lessons*—only, sometimes people are so stubborn that they will not even turn over the leaves of their school-books, much less *learn* the lessons that are set them."

"And sometimes so stupid, is it not?"

"I dare say it is. I wonder whether people can help being stupid!"

"What one *cannot* help is no fault, certainly. But the question *is*, How much can we help, that we might have helped if we had chosen to exert the brains and the hands that God Himself gave us for our use, and, consequently, for His glory?"

"I think," said Clare, slowly, after a minute's pause in the conversation, "that we cannot go far wrong if we try to make all our powers and faculties redound to God's glory. Now, I saw, only yesterday, in a newspaper, that God was *offended* by people trying to live without Him, and that not by refusing to acknowledge Him in all their ways, but by relying on *Science* to mend matters in the natural world."

"Yes," replied Edith, "I know the article you mean—I read it, too; and I could not help wondering how far the man who wrote it was right. Of course, God is greater than Science, and He can confound all the devices of erring mortals."

"Just so; and if those devices are meant to proclaim the independency of God's will, and the superiority of man himself, He will confound them. But Science is God's creature, as well as the elements which Science has taught us, in so many instances, to control. And the more deeply we study, in all reverence, the book of Science the better the Lord of Heaven and Earth will be pleased; for, surely, all His creations are His gifts, and He means us to make the very best of them, and glorify Him by turning them to our own service."

"But we never can stop the rain," burst out Lina.

"I don't see that we can," replied Clare, rather amused at the child's earnestness. "God Himself will stop it when we have had enough; and we do not know when we have had too much. In the meantime, we must try to learn all the lessons we can from this 'useful trouble of the rain.'"

"Mother often says," observed Tessie, "that it is such a *comfort* to remember that God knows best, and that He can no more be unkind than He can make a mistake."

"And father was talking about the ways in which hay can be *dried* now," continued Edith, "and about something called *ensilage* that they have discovered in America, I think, and saying that God drives us to our wits' end, in

order to put us on our mettle, and show us how we may, if we choose to take the trouble, utilise all *His* best gifts."

"And I recollect," said Clare, "a time when we were in France, a few years ago. There was no rain for months, and the ground was parched up, and the crops were being ruined by the drought. Everybody was crying out for rain, and water was being sold at an exorbitant rate in the streets of Paris. Well, there came to see us a gentleman—a famous philosopher people said he was—and he talked a great deal about the folly of the civilised world that was content to suffer alike from seasons of drought, and from flood, when it might be easily prevented by people doing their duty. It was quite possible, he said, in years of excessive rain to store up water for irrigation, so that great and fatal droughts should be prevented; and, at the same time, the deluges that effect as much mischief, very much diminished, if not actually avoided."

"Philip was saying something of the kind only yesterday after the river began to rise again; and he was complaining, too, of the tardy advance of science—especially agricultural science, such as could be turned to practical account; and father and he were discussing some plan that had been mooted between them a long time ago, only it involved many difficulties, and among them, more money than could well be spared. However, a good deal of drainage has been contrived since the last flood, and we hope the calamities that ensued then will not be repeated. It is only now and then that the Allan does overflow so dangerously; it is often very high, inconveniently so, and there is quite a little deluge, but it generally subsides before much mischief is done."

It was July when this conversation took place, and it rained perpetually. There was seldom a day in which there was not, either morning or evening, a regular downpour. It was hoped that there might be a favourable change in August.

"Well, it is good for the Mill to have plenty of water," said Mr. Darlington one day, when it was raining hard, and had been raining ever since early morning, "cats and dogs, and omnibuses," as Clare remembered her old nurse, Mrs.

Lock, of Jermyn Street, was wont to say. "We must hold by the Mill, boys," he continued; "we shall not get much by farming this year; the only things that thrive are the turnips and the mangolds, Philip says."

"The cereals might turn out tolerably, even now, if the weather cleared," rejoined Philip, who was present; "but I saw the new moon last night, and she looks watery, and the stars had tears in their eyes. Then old Thomas is crying out that his rheumatism is worse and worse; he says that his *joints* tell him it is going to rain again worse than ever."

"I think we had better cease our forebodings," interrupted the miller; "I believe there are such things as '*forecasts*,' but then there are certain conditions under which they fail. Sometimes all signs of improved weather are deceptive; and the same may be said when we have had a long drought and are longing for showers. I think, boys, we only worry ourselves by trying to determine beforehand what will be. What we can do we will do, and our Father is at the helm of affairs, and will order all things well."

So after that evening there were very few public discussions on the signs of the times, whether pluvial or otherwise; only, as Ralph said to Dick, and Dick said to Ralph, "things did not improve."

There was more consulting of barometers and thermometers than usual, and no one passed by the old weather-glass in the hall, which had the character of being *infallible*, without giving it a little shake. The Index pointed continually to "rain" and "much rain," and if the mercury showed signs of rising, it quickly fell again before it could well reach the point of "Change."

But it did not rain quite without intermission, and there were some bright lovely days, during which the sun shone out in cloudless splendour, and the ground began to dry. Of course, every possible advantage was taken by everybody of these delightful interludes, and Mrs. Darlington and her daughters seized the opportunity of a second fine morning, with the glass still rising, to do a day's shopping at Allan Bridge. Clare excused herself, because a bulky packet of "proofs" of her new story had arrived by the early post,

and she had been troubled with a little faceache, which would be increased rather than improved by driving in an open carriage. In fact, she rather anticipated pleasure from a solitary day. Her Cousin Robert and his sons would be in the Mill, and Philip would be at the Farm, except when they all returned for dinner and tea ; she would have quite a long morning, and a peaceful afternoon, all to herself, to spend exactly as she pleased.

The "proofs" occupied less time than she had expected, and she soon finished the new volume of "Idylls of the King" that Philip had brought her several days before. Then she bethought herself of answering Dorothea Vanderquist's last letter ; and then it was dinner-time. Mr. Darlington had an engagement at Duston, so he did not loiter over the meal ; Dick and Ralph hurried back to their occupations ; Philip did not make his appearance at all. He took his dinner, as he did occasionally, in a make-shift fashion, on his own territories. Clare began to find herself rather dull about four o'clock, and to wonder when the shopping party would return ; not till dark, she thought, for they had to get through quite a long list of things needed, and if Mrs. Darlington was not too tired, they thought of going on to Ormstead—an outlying district of the little seaport town—and taking an early cup of tea with an old friend.

She was just finding the long solitary afternoon a little dreary, and was almost falling asleep over yesterday's newspaper, when Philip entered, modestly requesting a speedy cup of tea, because he had fared so badly at dinner-time.

"We will have the tea-tray in directly," said Clare, brightening up. "We can choose our own time, for Cousin Margery and the girls will almost certainly be late and ready for their supper ; and Cousin Robert and the boys said I was not to wait for them. I am so glad you have put in an appearance, Philip. I was feeling quite moped, and almost wishing I had not declined the expedition for myself."

"Why did you decline it?"

"For one thing, I thought four persons were enough ; then I had my *proofs*, and they looked enticing, and perhaps I was a little lazy. I fancy this humid weather

does not exactly suit me ; I so very often feel tired and languid."

" You sit over your writing too much ; then Lina takes up a great deal of your time. You do not take sufficient exercise."

" I know I do not ; but unless we dance in the evening—as we very often do, when it grows dusk—what exercise can we take, unless we run up and down stairs, or defy the weather in goloshes and waterproof. I do miss my long walks and rambles very much."

" And you have less variety here than in London, of course. Ah, I was just going to ask you to order something a little more substantial than thick bread-and-butter. I shall enjoy a new-laid egg, nor shall I despise a good wedge of that crusty pie, for my old lady's cooking proved a complete failure to-day, and I am as hungry as a hunter."

These two loitered over their composite repast till it was fully half-past five, and Clare rose at last from her post behind the urn, undecided what to do with herself for the remainder of the evening. She had enjoyed her quiet chat with Philip very much, for Mr. Warner had always something to talk about, and he generally started some subject of conversation most interesting to Clare. His manner was still at times curt and abrupt, but she had long ago ceased to consider him discourteous. She had grown, somehow, to appreciate his companionship, and she found herself often entering into his pursuits, and taking up his rather peculiar views in a way that surprised herself. Yes, she liked him better than either Dick or Ralph ; all three boys had come to regard her as their sister, she thought ; but she knew which of the trio she preferred. Still, she had never quite forgotten the hot displeasure Philip had provoked on that Sunday afternoon, now many months ago ; only she sometimes told herself that "listeners," even involuntary listeners, seldom hear any good of themselves.

By-and-by, the tea-equipage being at last removed, Philip and Clare sauntered out into the garden, and deplored the mossy state of the gravel walks, and the weedy condition of the beds, where so many of the sweet summer-flowers were hanging down their sodden and splashed petals over the

dank, moist soil. They talked for a time about flowers, and seasons, and botanical pursuits, which had become quite a *furore* since Clare's return ; then he began to question her about her life in town, and she spoke more freely than she had done to any one, except her Cousin Margery. The conversation passed insensibly from one subject to another, and Philip, at last, was listening to an account of her visit at Chilling Towers, which seemed to interest him intensely. The Duke of Acresworth was not discussed, yet his name *was* mentioned ; and Clare's companion could scarcely find words expressive enough to speak his indignation and astonishment at the presumption of His Grace. He spoke so warmly, and with so much force, that Clare was fairly startled ; she listened and said nothing—wondering what Philip really wished her to understand, and feeling just a little uneasy, and, perhaps, a little shy.

Presently—unless her ears deceived her—*he* was making a distinct avowal of his affections, and proposing marriage. She was so taken by surprise that she scarcely knew in what words to answer him ; she was still silent, and he still fervently, passionately, indeed, preferring his suit.

At length she felt that she must say something, or consent would perhaps be taken for granted. She never exactly understood what swayed her at that moment ; but she drew herself up and answered coldly, even haughtily, “ No, no ! indeed, that cannot be. Never speak of it again ; I can never love you—never marry you ! ”

CHAPTER XXXI.

GATHERING CLOUDS.

“ The rain it raineth every day.”

AND slowly and silently Mr. Warner and Miss Darlington walked back to the house : it was growing dusk, but Clare could see how white and rigid was Philip's

handsome face. As she entered the dining-room, he lifted his hat, and returned to the garden without another word. She sat down in the miller's great chair, and thought. She had never expected this : it had come upon her like a sudden thunder-storm on a summer's-day—that no one looks for ; a declaration of love from Ralph, though in no wise anticipated, would have far less surprised her ; it had never once occurred to her, the possibility of Philip's caring for her in this fashion ; though now, as she pondered the matter, she took herself to task for her blindness and dulness, as certainly signs had not been altogether wanting of his growing preference.

Then she remembered how, when vexed and tormented by the Duke's arbitrary suit, she had wished that she *belonged* to somebody ; that there was some one in the world for whose sake she *must* decline ducal honour ; some one to whom she had a right to refer, whose life she hoped and expected some day to share. And now that she reflected calmly, she knew that she had really cherished this wish in her secret heart, and that, unknown to herself, this vague, unexpressed longing had borne an impress of Philip. What had possessed her so curtly, so positively, and so ungraciously, even, to refuse the proffered affection ?

She sat there, she did not know how long ; but the twilight faded, and the shadows deepened ; and, as the evening sky grew dark and cloudy, the wind, which had made a low moan, at intervals, all the afternoon, rose and swept through the valley, till it shook the branches of the heavy trees, and wailed sadly among the chimneys and gables of the old Mill House. Clare thought she had never listened to so melancholy a sound ; it was like a weary grieving spirit pouring out its fruitless regrets in sobs and wild laments, and earnest, vain repentance. It was like the voice of swiftly-coming sorrow. She had not felt so depressed, so saddened, so hopeless, since she had listened to the whistling of the wintry blast, and to the dismal plunge of the sea on that memorable Sunday at Bournemouth. And she had been so happy—so peacefully and serenely happy—ever since she came back to the pleasant Allan Water. Oh, what had possessed Philip to break the sweet, restful spell

that had seemed to gather about her from the day of her return ?

"And yet," she mused to herself, "I might have foreseen it, and I have found increasing satisfaction in Philip's society. I could read his welcome in his eyes on the very night of my arrival. His tone always softened when he spoke to me, especially if we were alone ; he never seemed so content as when he was paying me some little attention. Oh, why did I answer him so hastily—so thoughtlessly ? Why was I so foolishly taken by surprise ? I have looked for my King to come by, and I have reserved all homage for him, grudging even common courtesies to another. And lo ! he has flashed upon me, and I did not know him ; I scorned him, I *flouted* him, I let him go."

Clare was roused by the sound of voices ; the whole family had returned, and she remembered that she was sitting in the dark.

"Why, my dear, are you here ?" exclaimed Mrs. Darlington, as she entered ; "I thought the room was empty. How is it you have not rung for lights ?"

"I sat down after my walk in the garden, and thought, and thought, never observing how dark it was growing. I think the evenings are beginning to close in very early ; but to-night it is certainly darker than usual, the clouds are very heavy, and there are many signs of approaching tempest. Have you enjoyed your day, Cousin Margery ?"

"Well, my dear, I think I have succeeded in getting or ordering most of the things we wanted, though I am afraid we have not remembered all ; but I am wofully tired, and the day has been sultry. I shall not be sorry to go to bed."

"I shall not be sorry to see supper on the table," said Edith. "Nor I, either," said Tessie ; "I did not distinguish myself at tea-time." While Lina added rather pertly, "You might have had supper ready for us, Clare. Of course we are tired and hungry. You should have had the table spread and the lamps lighted ; and everything looking snug and cheerful. I suppose you were thinking of your new story. That is the worst of authors and authoresses—they are always living in a romance-world of their own,

scarcely heeding the actual present ; they are not fit for common, every-day life—they live in dreams."

"*Lina!*" said her mother, reprovingly, "you are forgetting yourself. Suppose you go at once and take off your bonnet while supper is being laid."

And Lina went, for she understood from her mother's tone that prompt obedience would be required ; but the poor child was really hungry and very tired, and felt something like a child's peevishness at the dismal air of unwelcome she was fain to encounter. Clare was roused, however, and felt very much ashamed, thinking of her own inertness. Her "new story," indeed ! Yes, it was a new, strange story that had come so abruptly into her life, and how stupidly she had mismanaged it. But very soon the room was lighted up, and a plentiful supper was laid on the table, and to it the travellers did full justice. They were not nearly so tired, either, when the pangs of hunger were appeased, and they were all quite ready to discuss the events of the day, and give Clare a full, true, and particular account of everything that had happened. There was plenty to talk about, so no one noticed Clare's fastidious appetite, which seemed to reject all the good things upon the board ; though Lina remarked that staying at home, and correcting "proofs," did not appear to agree with her cousin, and it was such a pity she had missed the finest day they had had for a month, "a day that would certainly not be repeated ! "

"No ; I am afraid a storm is brooding," said Cousin Margery, as she helped herself to delicious tapioca-pudding ; "I really began to hope this morning, as the glass continued to rise, and the sun was shining ; but I am afraid the rain is preparing to set in worse than ever ; there was a leaden bank of clouds in the west, into which the sun went down, and seemed altogether quenched. Everybody is getting to be exceedingly anxious about the harvest."

And then the miller and his eldest son came in, and brought the news that it was raining heavily. And the weather-glass which, for the first time since the early days of June, had risen above "Change," had dropped down again to "Much rain."

"God's will be done!" said the miller, sighing wearily; "but another fortnight of soaking rain will altogether ruin that splendid ten-acre field of wheat, that promised so well at midsummer."

"On the whole," said Dick, "it is the wettest season I ever remember. We may be thankful we are not flooded."

Then Ralph came, and asked where Philip was. But no one could be at all certain; he had not been seen since he returned with Clare to the house, and went away again in the direction of the Home Farm. But he would certainly return soon, for Philip was not given to late hours, or to impromptu absences. And, in fact, as the girls were going up to bed, his voice was heard in the kitchen. Clare thought she understood why he had chosen to make his appearance so much later than usual—he did not wish to see *her* again that night; and she, on her part, was not sorry to defer the meeting till to-morrow. She heard him stamping his feet on the kitchen floor, and shaking his macintosh, and saying how fortunate it was that both umbrella and macintosh happened to be at the Farm, and *not* at the Mill, as was too often the case when the rain came unexpectedly.

Then he was asking for bread and cheese, saying that he did not want a regular supper, and was quite wet enough to prefer going to bed immediately. Clare listened on the landing, half sadly and half comically thinking of that other listening episode, so many months ago, and wondering how much the remembrance of that conversation had influenced her.

"I have been very foolish," she said, as she closed her door and sat down to brush her hair. "I *do* like Philip: there's no evading it. I never liked anybody half so much, and I do believe that it was some sort of half-conscious remembrance of him that made me set my face like a flint against that insufferable Duke. I begin to understand myself a little, I think. Oh, why did I give that too hasty reply? Well, I have only myself to thank. I have behaved like a school-girl, who does not know her own mind. I must make no difference in my behaviour to Philip, and, of course, I cannot say a word of what happened in the

garden this evening. When he speaks again I shall be in my senses, I hope. My ‘No’ meant *No* when I said it. I am not, I never was, a coquette ; but I had scarcely spoken the word before I knew that I did not in my heart of hearts mean it—that I was endorsing the judgment of the past, and not that of the present.”

“He will surely speak again,” she resumed, as she continued her reverie ; “and just one word will suffice. I should not like to say anything at all unmaidenly, but I will not be *missish*! How many stories I have read of girls who have wrecked their happiness, and that of others, just for the want of a little frankness, a little outspokenness. One must not be *too* proud. I have heard that ‘love o’ermasters pride,’ and I know now that I do love Philip, though this morning I thought I only esteemed him—simply regarded him as a friend. Oh, I have been very, very foolish. I did not think it was in me to behave in such ‘bread-and-butter’ fashion. But so much is certain—if it is not he, it is none on earth ; if I never marry Philip I shall die unmarried. I wonder what to-morrow will bring forth ?”

But the morrow brought forth nothing of any account. When Clare came down to breakfast—and she was rather later than usual, not having slept well through the early part of the night—Philip had finished his repast, and gone off to Allan Bridge to look after some machinery that had been reported to him as on easy sale, and she did not even see him till quite late in the afternoon, when she was playing duets with Tessie, and she perceived him crossing the lawn, as he sometimes did when he came home by way of the Mill.

She played on, and made no remark ; but Tessie exclaimed, “Oh, there’s Philip ; I have not seen him since yesterday morning. Clare, do you know you are murdering that passage? I am sure you lost time in the syncopated bar ; and you forget we have changed into double-triple time.”

“I believe I have,” Clare replied ; “this is one of my very old duets ; I have not attempted it for—I cannot say how long. I believe I am quite out of practice, Tessie ; I

must try over this bar by myself—I always played the treble in former times. I never played it before with any one, except Louise d'Estrelles, and she invariably took the bass."

"Who was Louise d'Estrelles?"

"An old Parisian friend. We parted quite sentimentally, and were never to lose sight of each other on any account ; but it is Louise who has failed in the compact. I wrote to her when I was with the Stewarts, in Kilmarnock Gardens, and again, during the first month of my visit here, but she has never replied ; I dare say she has forgotten all about me by this time. Perhaps she is married, for French girls seldom remain single long after leaving school. The French fail entirely to appreciate what they call our institution of *vieilles filles*. Every girl has her *dot*, however small, and every girl finds her husband—that is to say, he is found for her, for a maiden who presumed to choose for herself would soon be in dire disgrace. People wondered much that papa did not arrange a suitable marriage for me before he died."

"You would not have liked it?"

"Nor would papa. He prided himself on remaining thoroughly English at heart, although he so much preferred residing abroad."

"I suppose you will never marry now?"

"What makes you suppose so?"

"Because you are still Miss Darlington, in spite of the many excellent opportunities you must have enjoyed ; you would scarcely have returned to us here if you had dreamed of marrying. We are not famous for *eligibles* in this part of the country ; besides, now you have your literary career before you, and that must be all-sufficient, even to an ambitious woman."

"Do you think so, Tessie?"

"I think it would satisfy me most fully if I had taken the first steps, as you have done, Clare. I must confess I should not like to lapse into hopeless spinsterhood, without having some object and position in life. I should not care to be a second Miss Argles. And yet that fate may befall me—may befall us all, indeed ; for though we are—we three

sisters, I mean—tolerably good-looking, we are not great beauties, and shall certainly have very little by way of fortune. And yet——”

“And yet what, Tessie?”

“There is some one who cares for Edith, unless I am very much mistaken.”

“I have had an idea of the same kind myself. I wonder if we are thinking of the same person?”

“I dare say we are. And last evening, when we were at Ormstead, I felt almost sure that I was not deceived. The son of our old friend Mrs. Anderson was there, and he seemed amazed at the alteration that had taken place in Edith during the last two years.”

“He lives in London, I think I have heard you say?”

“Yes; he is, like his father, a Congregational minister, and he has lately been appointed to a church of some importance. It is just settled; and he ran down to see his parents before he is properly ordained to the charge. It was quite a chance that we went over to Ormstead yesterday afternoon. Mother had almost decided to come straight home, for she was very tired when we left Gray and Webster’s, and it was almost a quarter to five by the Library clock. The clouds, too, had begun to look threatening. It would be very curious if anything came of it, would it not? But Charles Anderson did seem very much struck with our Edie, and she looked so handsome, and talked so well. She would make an excellent pastor’s wife.”

“That she would. But I am not sure that we are justified in talking about her possible future.”

“Of course, I should not speak to any one but to you, and you are safe, I know. Mother has been saying what a very superior young man Charles Anderson has become. And she has been asking his sister, Margaret Anderson, to come and spend a few days with us, if the weather will only improve a little. By the way, I have thought sometimes that Philip admires Margaret extremely; and, now I come to think of it, he has been over to Ormstead more than once this summer.”

“My dear Tessie, you are becoming quite a match-maker.”

"And so I am ; I am afraid I am a bit of a gossip at heart, and you do right to reprove me. Only, I suppose, one's mind does narrow through living a purely rural life ; we—that is, *I*—will talk no more about Charles or Margaret Anderson, though I must confess I should not object to be related to either, or both of them. There is the tea-bell ; we have forgotten all about our troublesome duet."

They went into the dining-room, where Philip was hurriedly finishing his tea—he wanted to get back to the Farm, he said ; he was thinking of putting into practice a new mode of drying hay that had been suggested to him. He spoke kindly and courteously to both the girls, as they entered ; but there was nothing in his tone, or look, or manner that could possibly be construed into any remembrance of the preceding evening ; there was not the smallest constraint in his manner of addressing Clare—the whole episode might have been a dream, she thought ; and she could not help feeling just a little piqued, and wondering whether he had totally dismissed the whole affair from his mind. She felt relieved, however ; it would have been so very awkward had explanations become inevitable. As matters stood between Philip and herself, it was such a comfort to be able to go on in the old way, no questions being asked. Even Lina's sharp eyes would not be able to detect any difference.

Just as Philip rose to go, and was stipulating for some warm soup for his supper, something was said, though certainly not by Tessie, about Charles Anderson.

"Did you know, Philip," asked Lina, with that grown-up air she was so fond of assuming,—"did you know that Charlie Anderson has got a church of his own, near London ? It is called the Beaufort Church, because a Beaufort was the founder, long ago."

"Yes ; I knew all about it. It was all but settled two months ago ; but I was asked not to speak of it, till the ultimate arrangements were completed. The Andersons, one and all, are extremely pleased ; it is just the sphere for Charlie, I should say."

"I wonder if Margaret will go and keep house for him ?" suggested Miss Lina, thoughtfully. "Susan is quite old

enough to take her place at Ormstead Manse ; don't you think so, mother ? ”

“ I dare say she is,” replied Mrs. Darlington ; “ but, really, Lina, I have not thought about it.”

“ And Charlie himself will marry, of course,” responded Lina ; “ should not you think he would, Philip ? ”

“ I really cannot say,” replied Philip, shortly. “ I am not in his confidence, Lina ; and if I were, I should hesitate before answering your question. Little girls must not be too inquisitive ; besides, it is rather vulgar to speculate on our friends' private concerns.”

And then no more was said, except that Mrs. Darlington remarked how very much pleased his mother and father and sisters were. Lina retired in high dudgeon, meditating the rejoinder that she would make some day, which should reduce Philip to ignominious silence, and cure him of finding fault with her. But Clare could not help observing a faint colour suffuse Edith's face, and that she took no part in the conversation ; at the same time, she reproved herself for trying to read her cousin's feelings in her face ; “ for,” argued she to herself, “ it is the very thing I should protest against myself. What is the matter with us all, I wonder ? Not only poor little Lina, but others, who ought to know better, seem to have caught the gossiping infection. Really, I think matrimony must have been in the air last night.”

It was something of a relief when a new subject was started. The men had all gone away, and the elder girls were still lingering over their tea, when Mrs. Darlington said, “ My dears, did I tell you that I heard from Miss Argles this morning ? She is coming to see us almost directly. She will be able to enjoy a full fortnight with us, she says ; it does not matter so that she is in her place again the day before term commences. She wonders whether we shall keep ‘ Harvest-home ’ this year, as we did last.”

“ I am sadly afraid we shall have no harvest worth celebrating,” said Edith, sadly. “ Mother, I wonder that father keeps up his spirits as well as he does. Philip looks quite depressed and melancholy, and I am not surprised ; he told me two days ago that the season promised to be the very

worst he could remember, and, to complicate matters, there had been a far larger outlay than usual. Nothing but a sudden blaze of almost tropical sunshine, he says, would ripen the corn."

"Well, my dear, I am afraid things are going very badly, as far as we can see; but let us take courage, and remember that God orders everything—even these ceaseless, drenching rains. And, above all, do not make any lament before your father or the boys. The men, upon whose shoulders all the weight and responsibility rests, ought never to be troubled by any selfish or thoughtless speech of the women of the family. It is a woman's place to cheer and inspirit; and that often is best done by diverting the attention from depressing circumstances. I did think Philip seemed very much out of spirits when he came in at tea-time. If he is at home tolerably early to-night, you girls must give him some of his favourite songs and pieces; and, Clare, you know what a soothing effect some of the *Songs Without Words* have upon Robert; he says nothing hardly rests him like good sweet music."

"And when does Miss Argles arrive, Cousin Margery?"

"If I do not hear to the contrary, she will be with us on the evening of the day after to-morrow. She will have her old room, of course."

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE RISING OF THE WATERS

“The heart had hardly time to beat,
Before a ‘shallow, seething wave’
Sobbed in the grasses at our feet :
The feet had hardly time to flee
Before it broke against the knee,
And all the world was in the sea.”

MISS ARGLES made her appearance at the appointed time, vastly improved in every respect, Clare thought, since she had figured as Lady Forest's scapegoat, and in most excellent spirits.

“Oh, my dear Miss Clare,” she began, as soon as she was comfortably settled at tea, “you cannot think how pleased I am to see you in your own happy home again. I owe more to you than I can ever express. Where should I have been but for you? What would have become of me when her ladyship thrust me out upon the world—as must have happened sooner or later—if Providence had not sent *you* to my relief? What might not have been my fate if we had not met in the public reading-room at Allan Bridge?”

“I have no doubt Providence would have provided you with some other means of escape,” replied Clare, smiling to find her old friend as enthusiastic and as gushing as ever. “I have often told you I only behaved with common humanity.”

“It was not what you *did* so much as the kindly spirit which prompted you, my dear young lady. And then, how much has resulted from that unexpected encounter!”

“How much, indeed! My own life for many months afterwards was influenced by what transpired that day.”

“Ah, of course it was. But when I reflect on my own experiences, they seem almost too wonderful to be reality. Nothing would do, you know, but you must come to Silver-beach, and while you were my lady's guest you were so very

kind to me—poor, foolish old thing that I was—that I felt I could not go away quite out of your *orbit*, as I may express it, and not bid you a grateful good-bye. And then these dear, good relatives of yours took pity on me ; this dear Mrs. Darlington and Miss Edith and Miss Tessie—not to speak of the miller himself—saw what a poor, miserable, helpless creature I was, about as unfit to make my way in the world as a baby just out of arms. Then, you know, my dear, they kept me a while, and taught me to keep myself—ay, and they taught me more than that, thank the Lord. They showed me my duty, and how to do it ; and, last of all, they secured me a quiet, comfortable situation, in which I could work honestly, and get my own living as a Christian woman ought to do. I have nothing to do that is really beyond my powers, for I can sew and mend pretty fairly, as *you* know, Mrs. Darlington ; and, as to nursing the sick boys, and cossetting up the weakly ones, there is nothing I like better. I feel quite a mother sometimes when the poor little fellows get into trouble. And it all comes of that one never-to-be-forgotten hour in the library, dear Miss Clare ! I should have gone straight home to Worcester, and died in the workhouse, in all probability, if I had not felt that I *must* see your sweet, kind face once more."

"We are glad, very glad, you felt obliged to take leave of Clare," said Mrs. Darlington, who was quite affected at the little woman's unfeigned gratitude. "Deary me, what do we come into the world for but to help each other ? And now see, we have you for our friend for life, and you will come to visit us whenever you have the opportunity. We are all the better for Lady Forest's visit to Allan Bridge that day, I hope."

"Yes, and I grumbled at being obliged to go out that morning. I had a bad headache—I always had headaches then, for I was always crying and fretting. I am sure I wonder my brains did not turn into pulp. Lady Forest used to say to me, 'Argles, you'll dissolve like a snail some day ; nature must have intended you for a *mollusc* !' But then she was so very harsh, and was always scolding me before the servants. Oh, my dear Miss Clare, is the novel finished yet ? "

"No, Miss Argles, it is not, and I do not expect it ever will be. You were quite right about Lady Forest's fitful caprices ; she never keeps to one settled purpose long enough to bring it to a satisfactory conclusion. She finished, with your help, the first volume, but never attacked the second. She and I lived in the fashionable world, and we did not concern ourselves with literature. If she ever publishes her novel, of course we shall know."

"And is it true, Miss Clare, that you are such a great authoress yourself?"

"It is not true, Miss Argles ; I am writing for the *Grosvenor Magazine*—that is all. My cousins naturally overrate my powers, and credit me with most wonderful abilities. I always fancied I could succeed, in a small way, if I could only secure a hearing ; and Mr. Christopher Grey, the editor and proprietor of the magazine, and of *Christendom*, you know, has been very kind, and as good as promises to be my friend."

"And you don't employ an amanuensis?"

"I do not require one. I should find it difficult, if not impossible, to dictate my own compositions, and the printers and readers have not found any fault with my handwriting."

"I should think not, indeed ; nothing can be clearer, or more beautifully legible, than your *caligraphy*—yes, 'caligraphy,' that was what Mr. Philip Warner called it. I have a good memory for words, though I am such a wretched scribbler, and never could understand English grammar, or remember any of the rules of English composition. I certainly made a great mistake when I undertook the duties of private secretary to a literary lady—especially to one of my lady's extremely irritable and domineering temper. Oh, I made a great many mistakes in those days, dear Miss Clare."

Miss Argles soon settled down into her old ways at the Mill, insisting on undertaking as many of her former duties as her friends would permit. "Only, you know, you are to keep holiday now, and be content to amuse yourself ; you cannot have many leisure hours at Dorset House, I should think ?" said Mrs. Darlington to her, when she found her

taking in hand some very fine old table linen that required the most skilful of darning.

"Ah, but I do so enjoy doing it," replied Miss Argles ; "there are not many people who know how to do this particular kind of mending—'fine drawing,' we used to call it in my young days. I flatter myself that I can do it even more successfully than Miss Edith, now I have such delightful spectacles. But, dear Mrs. Darlington, I really think some of these table-cloths are getting almost past repair."

"I think they may be made to serve our turn a little longer ; they are nearly worn-out, I must confess. They are beautiful damask, are they not ? I shall never have any more so fine and good as these."

"And why not, dear Mrs. Darlington ?"

"They are too expensive *now* ; we are not so rich as we were during the earlier years of our married life. Business is not what it used to be, and farming has been sadly unprofitable of late years. Even Philip, who will never look on the dark side of things, shakes his head at present. It is a question whether the harvest will pay for the mere gathering-in ; we have had scarcely any sunshine, and drenching rains day after day. Still, we will not despair ; things may mend even yet ; and God is over all. He can bring good out of evil, and light out of darkness—that is the one great comfort that never fails."

"And that great comfort you taught me how to possess ; a year ago I knew so little about it. Ah, I shall never forget that harvest-supper—*never*. How often I have sung that hymn over to myself since that evening, and how often I have read that psalm, and thought of how good the Lord is to all His creatures."

"Yes, we must not doubt His goodness, though this trial of our faith may be very hard to flesh and blood. It is so difficult not to lose heart sometimes, and say, like ancient Israel, 'all these things are against me.' This constant wet weather would be depressing, too, even if so much did not depend upon its ceasing. My husband is complaining sadly of his rheumatism, and the young people say they never remember being so persistently tormented with neuralgia and faceache."

"Ah, the rheumatism is my most troublesome enemy ; but it does not hinder me from sewing neatly, as it did from writing legibly. And I find the use of *Rhus Opodeldoc* very effectual. It is all settled, then—I may undertake these lovely old table-cloths and napkins. I shall take my time about them, of course ; I can easily get them all done before my return to Dorset House. But I don't like to hear *you* talk about expense, and not being able to afford things you have been accustomed to all your life."

"Then I will not talk ; I have got into the habit of late, through feeling compelled to urge sundry little economies on my children. It is wise, you know, to retrench in time, but a revival of trade, or two or three abundant years, would make all the difference, and replenish our coffers, for we are not extravagant people, and are content to do without many of the real luxuries of life. And you need not distress yourself because of anything I have said ; I am only like a prudent woman, thinking of what *may* betide if circumstances do not mend. At present we have enough, and more than enough, for all our needs, and we can well afford to dispense hospitality, and to help our poorer neighbours."

Nevertheless, the heart of every Darlington of them all failed more and more as the weather gradually became worse, and the unripe corn lay soaking and spoiling in the deluged fields. Even Tessie got a reprimand from her father when she came in one day from a constitutional she had snatched during a gleam of watery sunshine, which was quickly followed by a heavy, pelting shower.

"Well, father dear," she persisted, "it *is* provoking ; there, I took the trouble to put on my ulster and my goloshes, and to fasten up my skirts, and I had not got further than the end of the long walk, when down came the rain ; and now the paths are really too muddy for anything. Things cannot be worse than they are."

"I am not sure of that, Tessie. But it is of no use to worry ourselves about coming evils that we cannot prevent. If we can remedy a misfortune, let us act, and not talk ; if we cannot act, then let us be silent, and leave events in the hands of God. In quietness and confidence is many a

Christian's only strength. Nothing is weaker, more un-Christianlike, more contemptible, than a torrent of wordy lament that can have no issues, except that of ventilating one's own apprehension and bad temper. I read the other day of somebody who kept a 'moan-book.' I am not sure that it is a very wholesome practice, but it is certainly un-selfish. I know no greater nuisance than a man or woman always making a plaint of some kind ; whereas the diary, or whatever it is, is none the worse for the oft-told tale, and nobody suffers."

"*Can* Christian people grumble, do you think, father ?"

"Well, my dear, I should be very sorry to say that grumblers are never Christians, though grumbling is rather a vice than a virtue, and is about as dishonouring to true religion as anything can be. But I have generally found that 'grumblers' never acknowledge themselves as such ; and are generally people who make the loudest profession of piety with the least possible possession of faith, or works either. To say the least of it, grumbling is an inconsistency that goes very far to make the world despise Christianity, as well as the grumblers themselves."

"Certainly, nothing ever comes of grumbling."

"Except the irritation of another person's temper. If grumbling will remedy a nuisance, by all means grumble away. If it will not, hold your peace, or else own yourself to be a weak-minded person, with very little sense, and destitute of the commonest Christian virtues. But don't talk piously about 'God's will,' and being desirous to leave all things in *His* hand, or the world will very naturally accuse you of rank hypocrisy. And hypocrisy of a sort it is."

And, meantime, it rained and rained, as if it never meant to leave off, and there began to be complaints of various sorts throughout the household. Places were damp that never were damp before ; a general flavour of mouldiness pervaded many rooms ; the roof called out for repairs, gutters overflowed, cement cracked and leaked, even the drains had to be attended to, so choked continually were they with the silted mud and gravel. Things began to look serious ; and the miller and his sons devoted themselves almost entirely

to the management of the more recent sluices, by means of which it was evident that a vast quantity of superfluous water was carried off, to the great benefit of the whole neighbourhood. Philip stayed very much at the Farm, though now and then he offered his services at the Mill, where there was really something to do. He had got his hay as dry as was possible under the circumstances, he said. *Ensilage* was not yet much more than an experimental idea, which might, or might not, succeed ; and as for the wheat and barley, there was nothing for it but to look at the fields from day to day, and watch their too apparent deterioration.

On the 10th of September not a sickle had been set to work, not an ear of corn was ripe unto the harvest ; a pale, green, or sickly yellow, varied with ugly patches of smutty black and brown, pervaded the whole lugubrious landscape.

Clare felt greatly depressed ; the damp atmosphere did not suit her constitution, and her spirits suffered. She grew languid and listless, even her writing could not interest her, and she was reminded perpetually of some of her first days of authorship, when she grew sad and weary over the sentences that persistently refused to shape themselves into good, flowing English. Philip was kind and courteous, but he carefully refrained from any allusion to that evening when he had pressed his suit so ardently—perhaps he regretted having spoken—perhaps he was one of those men who never ask twice for what has been deliberately refused them. Philip certainly would never speak again ; never breathe one word of a secretly cherished hope, which she might modestly encourage him to indulge. She had had her chance, and she had flung it from her ; her King had come by and laid his crown at her feet, and she had not even, so she told herself, rejected him with common civility. No ; Philip would *never* address her more as a lover—he was not the man to persist after he had been once so haughtily repelled. He did not resent her conduct—it might have been more hopeful, she fancied, if he had ; things might have come right if he had been piqued, and shown signs of displeasure. There was no room for a soothing word, a kindly glance, an implied preference—all went on exactly as before ; no one knew that Philip had proposed and been rejected ; no one

guessed it even remotely. If he looked a little graver than usual, or seemed more taciturn than was his wont, no one wondered. He only followed suit with Dick and Ralph. He could scarcely be expected to look bright and happy under present depressions. Even the miller was very silent, and read thoughtfully by the fireside from his big old Bible, and seemed to find his only satisfaction in mute contemplation, and perhaps in secret prayer. It seemed rather a sad world, just now, for everybody at the old Abbey Mill, and indeed for the whole country-side ; and day after day the rain fell, and the waters deepened, and the clouds grew thicker and darker, and there was no ray of sunshine to gild the gathering gloom.

And morning and evening the miller prayed, with his family kneeling round him, "May it please Thee, O Lord, in Thine own good time, to grant us such seasonable weather as may permit us to gather in the fruits of the earth; stay, if it be Thy good will, this trouble of the waters ; but Thou art our Father, and our trust is in Thee, so shall we never be confounded. Grant now patience and faith, and when *Thou* willest send us a clear shining after the rain."

On the 10th and 11th of September it never ceased to rain either day or night ; but on the morning of the 12th the clouds broke a little, and the downpour changed into a drizzle.

"Let us put on our waterproofs and take a turn," said Clare, about noon, to Edith, who was mournfully contemplating the drenched walks and lawns without.

"With all my heart," replied Edith. "I am tired as tired can be of keeping in the house ; only, where can we go ? The garden is a quagmire, and part of it is under water, for I see the mill-dam has commenced to overflow. The Duston Road will be miry enough, but I suppose it is our only resource."

"Would not the road in the contrary direction be preferable ? The ground on the other side of the bridge is firmer and higher, I think."

"We might try ; we can but get wet."

And so the two girls, cloaked and goloshed, sallied forth.

They soon came to the bridge, which was not a very substantial erection, and they found to their dismay that the waters had risen nearly to the top of the piers that supported it, and were beating against them with such force that the whole structure trembled and seemed about to give way. "I am afraid to cross," said Edith, pausing in some trepidation; "we might get over in safety, but I very much doubt whether we should be able to return the same way. That bridge will not stand the pressure much longer."

Clare agreed that it would be the height of imprudence to attempt the bridge. Even as they stood, in suppressed consternation, the timbers cracked and quivered, and one rather dilapidated plank was already parting from its neighbours, while every moment the waves rose visibly higher, and dashed with greater force against the bank. A little way farther on, and the road was submerged as far as they could see.

"I really think we had better go home at once," said Edith, turning very pale, as a foaming wave dashed almost at her feet; "I fancy neither father nor the boys know how badly things are going, and they might think it right to open the last cut sluices."

Just then they espied a man on horseback drawing near. It was a large, strong animal that ploughed its way along the road, with the surging water above its fetlocks, and the girls at once recognised Ralph Darlington mounted on the trusty old grey mare, that had so often served her masters in good stead for carrying heavy loads of flour. Ralph halted in some astonishment—"Turn back, girls, this instant!" he cried, as he came splashing towards them; "don't you see the waters are rising fast? The bridge at Darley Foot is gone already: this one is going; and you are quite too near to it."

"We had no idea there was such a flood," said Edith, nervously; "it reminds me of that time when we were children; but the sluices cannot be *all* open?"

"But they are—every one of them. They are altogether unequal to carrying off such a volume of water. And there is a talk about a great tide at Allan Bridge; the lower part of the town is inundated already, Jones, of Settleham, tells

me ; I met him a quarter of an hour ago making his way home as fast as he could ; he is very much afraid for the riverside farm buildings."

" Ralph, is there any danger ? " asked Clare, quietly.

" I dare not say there is not," he replied. " Of course, the flood may be at its height, now, and the falling of the tide in the Estuary will make a speedy difference. Let us trust in God, and hope for the best ; but there is really very little to be done. If the river rises a foot or two higher I shall tremble for the dam."

While Ralph spoke he, and the girls too, were progressing on their way home to the Mill House. When they were nearly at the side garden gate they looked back, and Ralph, from his vantage point on the tall horse, saw how fast the waves were gaining upon them. He uttered an exclamation of dismay. " Run on, girls," he cried, " and tell them at home to be on their guard, so far as may be. I shall dash across to the Mill to see if anything remains to be done."

And away sped Ralph on his good grey mare through the sea that was now covering all the lower lawn. His father met him at the Mill door, the steps up to which were already submerged.

" I am thankful you are come," cried the miller ; " Philip is just in from Allan Bridge, and he says there is an apprehension of a great tidal wave which will drive the waters up the valley, and every streamlet and rivulet is swollen to a torrent."

" Are all the flood-gates open ? "

" All of them, and have been, these many hours. I am afraid for the dam. If that gives way the worst may be apprehended."

" What can we do ? "

" Nothing, except have the *boats* in readiness. I have had so much of the grain as I could manage to stow away carried into the old Tower Granary ; that is such a solid building, I think it may stand, even if the Mill goes."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FROM THE WATCH TOWER"

"Water, water, everywhere!"

TO the extreme satisfaction of every one, the sudden rising of the flood was stayed. And yet it could not be said to be abated ; it began to rain again steadily, if not heavily, and the waves made no sign of retreating. About four o'clock in the afternoon there commenced a regular downpour, speedily accompanied by a visible increase in the water, and later in the evening the alarm and dismay became general.

Clare was once more in her own room, standing at the window, where she had paused so often to admire the prospect. She could no longer discern which was the actual bed of the river ; she could only guess at the course of the once placid Allan, by observing that one particular current was more billowy, and looked deeper, than the other numerous streams that were flowing in various directions, continually increasing in volume and strength, and ever and anon blending their rushing torrents. It was many days since the banks had begun to be actually overflowed ; the river had risen so gradually that it was only by comparing certain old water-marks with the present signs of flood that they could be quite certain how much the waters had advanced. But during the last eight-and-forty hours they had gained ground so rapidly, that all who beheld looked at each other in mute consternation, wondering when the awful deluge would be stayed.

"This morning," pondered Clare, "the water was only on the further side of the garden—when I got up, I could just see the little waves lapping the edge of the shrubbery ; and now, one might take boat right across the lawn, and almost into the Mill porch itself. It's dreadful, really dreadful. I wonder whether it was ever like this in the old

floods that Cousin Margery and Edith talk about?" almost shivering at the remembrance.

At that moment she heard Edith's voice calling to her from the landing : "Clare, are you in your room? I am going to the top of the watch-tower, that I may see what is to be seen from the turret before it gets too dark. Will you accompany me? I feel almost as timid as a child. I am unnerved, I think."

Clare replied by joining her cousin in the dark long passage leading to the deserted wing, whence only there was access to the stairs which must be mounted in order to gain the top of what was commonly called the "watch-tower." It was not much of an observatory, though it was sometimes used for amateur star-gazing when the young people wanted to amuse themselves with a little science; but the uppermost chamber was a good many feet higher than the rest of the building, and rose above the most elevated chimney-stack. It was a part of the old ecclesiastical mansion, and was not very often visited, for the stairs were steep and awkward—even dangerous if carelessly trodden, the edges being worn away by the footsteps of long-past generations, especially those of one particular monk, who selected the top room in the turret as his cell, and died there, at an advanced age, after a solitary life of severe penance and unbroken privation.

Edith unlocked the outer door of the deserted rooms—their desolate emptiness, and the lumber some of them contained, was better shut away from the rest of the house, Mrs. Darlington thought; besides, the scathing traces of the lightning still remained black and ghastly on the mouldering woodwork. Clare had scarcely been there since the day of the storm; but she was struck now by the damp chill that seemed to fall upon her as she crossed the threshold, and there was a general odour of mustiness. Not fire now, but water, was the enemy to be apprehended. This side of the house was darker than the other, for some old unlopped ashes and beeches overhung the scorched and shattered casements, which had been repaired anyhow so as to render them weather-proof. The girls had to grope their way to the turret-chamber.

"Keep your dress as tightly about you as you can," said Edith, as the last steps narrowed to something little better than a dilapidated foot-ladder, shelving treacherously ; "the walls are all over dust and cobwebs—we have not been here for nearly twelve months ; when Philip and Tessie and I came up last time we were all in a hurry, because we saw in the almanac that there was to be an eclipse that night, and the sky was beautifully clear. Give me your hand, Clare ; a false step just there might be disastrous. Yes, here we are in the old hermit's cell ; and, dear me ! how dreadfully damp and mouldy it smells."

"No wonder ; the walls are streaming with wet, and all the place is dank with mould and mildew. The ceiling, too, is almost gone."

"I fancy the lead above has perished. I do not think father will ever put this part of the old house into repair again."

"Something must be done, or it will fall to ruins. It will soon become unsafe, I should think."

"Father did talk, only last winter, of having all this wing, and of course the tower, pulled down before it became really dangerous. It is difficult to realise the swift progress of decay when rooms are once left quite untenanted and uncared for. He did call in a trustworthy master builder from Allan Bridge to inspect the place ; because, though he was not himself afraid, he thought it would be quite as well to have the opinion of an expert."

"And what did the Allan Bridge builder say ?"

"He said that the stones and mortar were strong enough, but that the walls were not altogether to be relied on. He thought that the *thunderbolt*, as the common people phrase it, had done more damage than we had suspected. One or two very wide cracks had opened, and Ralph says they are widening by slow degrees, though we see little of them because of the ivy. Mother would like some of the useless rooms done away with, for they only harbour dust and vermin, and cause unnecessary trouble and expense. But look, Clare, look ! our valley is like the sea !"

From the turret there was, as Edith said, a most extensive view. They could see for miles along the course of

the river ; and through one break of the hills, in fine weather, even the shipping and church spires of Allan Bridge could be discerned. On clear sunny days it was indeed a beautiful prospect ; there was the crystal winding river, with its lovely wooded banks, its hoary cliffs and *scaurs*, and its widening estuary, far away, losing itself in the golden sands. There were green flowery meadows, deep, sombre, pine forests, sheltered nest-like villages, and pleasant hamlets, lone farmhouses, and here and there grey battlemented towers ; while, closer at hand, was the beautiful vale of the Allan, well-watered and fruitful ; the broad acres whence the yellow corn had been reaped and garnered earlier than this in the preceding year ; the pasture-meadows, generally down in fragrant hay no later than mid-summer ; and, nearer still, the pleasant gardens of the Mill, that ought to have been ablaze with dahlias, asters, scarlet geraniums, and other gay autumnal blossoms.

But now, as Edith said, they looked on one wide, dismal waste of waters. Far and wide, as far as the eye could reach, north, south, east and west, rolled the sullen waves ; and in the distance, where the river broadened into the estuary, there lay a long line of angry surf, while the hill-streams dashed madly into the vale below, with a boom like low muttered thunder. And it seemed to the affrighted girls that the sound deepened as they listened, and that the white streaks of foam multiplied and widened as they leaped from rock to rock in the fading light of the gloomy September evening.

"I did not think it was so bad as this," said Edith, mournfully ; "it grows worse and worse, Clare. I almost wish we had not come."

"It would have been all the same, though we had not seen it," replied Clare. "The destruction, the desolation would have been the same."

"Yes ; and the *danger*."

"Do you think there is actually any *danger*?—danger impending, and very near at hand ?"

"I am sure there is danger. The mill-dam will never stand the strain. If it bursts, we shall be exposed to the whole fury of the flood. Oh, what an angry sky ! And see,

the water is close to the walls now—it has almost reached the house. Let us go down ; we may be wanted."

When they went down, however, they found all as usual in the kitchen and parlours. The maids were busy getting the tea, and Tessie was calmly cutting bread and butter. Lina was practising painstakingly in the schoolroom. The water was really not so very close to the house as it had seemed, looking down from the airy turret ; but it was near enough to awaken apprehensions in those who watched its rise. The shutters were closed, the curtains drawn, the fire burned clearly on the hearth, while the kettle sang merrily on the hob. It was a picture of peace and comfort that Edith and Clare beheld as they came into the dining-room, where Miss Argles and Mrs. Darlington were quietly seated. Neither the miller, nor his sons, nor Philip Warner were there.

"Where is father ?" asked Edith, trying to command her voice ; but there was a tremulous strangeness in her tone that instantly roused and thrilled the mother's heart.

She looked up quickly from her needlework. "Edie, my child, is anything the matter ?"

"Only, mother dear, that I am afraid. I am not quite sure that we ought to sit down contentedly to tea with the flood almost upon us. Do you know how high the waters are ?"

"Yes, my love ; the river has risen terribly since the morning, and I am afraid the garden is spoilt for this season, and neither am I quite comfortable about some of the poultry ; still, if their usual roosting-place is invaded, they can fly up into the trees. Philip is seeing to the cattle ; the sheep were driven up to the high pastures a week ago, or more. All has been done that can be done, I think ; we are pretty much in the same plight as we were eleven—or is it *twelve*?—years ago. But we are better prepared now to meet the enemy."

"Are you sure of that, mother ?"

"What can you mean, Edith ?—your looks, almost more than your words, alarm me. What do you know that I do not ?"

"Clare and I have been up to the 'Watch Tower,' and

what we have seen there has struck terror to our hearts. The whole country, as far as the sight can reach, is under water ; and in spite of all the sluices, in which we trusted so fully, we are surrounded. One can scarcely put one's foot out of doors ; the waves on all sides are scarcely three feet from the walls of the house."

Mrs. Darlington rose with the intention of opening the front hall door and inspecting for herself the actual state of affairs ; Miss Argles followed her. But before either of the ladies could cross the threshold of the dining-room, there were sounds of distress from the back settlements, and the swing door that shut out the kitchen vestibule was violently thrown open.

"What is it, Jemima ?" asked Mrs. Darlington, as a young servant, lately arrived, burst in with open mouth, and a countenance expressive of unfeigned fright. In her right hand she held aloft a toasting-fork, thrust into a slice of half-browned bread. "Oh, the river, ma'am, the river !" she cried, hysterically ; "the river is in the kitchen, and there's a drowned, dead sheep at the door."

The ladies straightway adjourned to the kitchen, and, truly enough, the river, or rather the river-water, was half-way across the floor, and a drowned animal, of some kind, was lying in the open doorway.

"Where is your master, where are the young gentlemen ?" cried Mrs. Darlington, turning to the cook, who was already ankle-deep in water. "What is to be done ?"

"There is nothing to be done but to get upstairs as fast as we can," was Tessie's reply, "and take up with us all the perishable goods we can lay hands upon." And as she spoke, Lina with scared face rushed in from the schoolroom. "Oh, mother ! oh, Edie !" she exclaimed, "there's a great wave broken in through the window, and Clare's desk is floating off the table. I can hear the dash of water against the front door. What will become of us ?"

There was clearly nothing for it but to ascend to the second story, and a sort of stampede of the servants immediately took place, Jemima, the new kitchen-maid, retreating with her own workbox and a fine gilded pictorial Prayer-Book that had been awarded her on leaving the

National School of her native village. Cook and Deborah wisely seized upon some of the comestibles ; for, as cook sagely argued, "they might be kept upstairs for days and days, and they might as well have what was in the larder before they starved." Miss Argles laid violent hands upon the sturdy little farm boy, who had gone on stolidly devouring bread and cheese, regardless of the uproar ; and by main force—or so it seemed—compelled him to give his assistance in rescuing the sewing machine, which the waters already touched. The four girls and Mrs. Darlington straightway addressed themselves to carrying into safety all the movable property in the lower rooms.

"We are losing time and strength," urged Clare, when she had made several journeys up and down. "Two of us might stay on the landing to receive what is handed up, it can be put anywhere ; do you not see that we must economise our forces, the water is gaining upon us ? Cousin Margery, you and Lina, and Deborah, can take the things from us as fast as we can remove them. I wish we had a man to help us at the bottom ; Edie and I are not strong enough."

Almost as the words passed her lips there was an unexpected arrival. Charles Anderson, the young Congregational minister, of whom Tessie had been talking the evening after the visit to Ormstead, appeared upon the scene. He had been to the Mill, he said, but finding every one there too busy to speak to him, he had thought himself that some one might be wanted at the Mill House, which must be at least threatened by the fast rising waters.

"But how did you get here, you are not very wet?" asked Clare.

"No, only splashed a little. There are plenty of boats, or punts rather, down at Scarth, where first you have to take to water ; and I seized one and sculled myself up here, for I was pretty sure you must be in trouble. You are saving what you can—let me help you, Edith, that work-table is too heavy for you ; let me take it."

No sooner said than done ; in less time than it takes to talk about it, the work-table was safe on the first landing,

and Mr. Anderson was busily emptying the book-cases. Then the harmonium caught his eye. "We must take that *next*," he said, "or it will be spoilt. Are there any men in the house?"

"I'm here, sir," piped Jem, who, having been thoroughly aroused by Miss Argles, was quite equal to the occasion. "I'm mighty strong, sir; me and you can get the heavy thing upstairs between us, I'll warrant."

"Make haste then; we've no moment to lose—I hear the water bubbling under the front door. Here, you maids, put down cloths, or what you can; let us keep it out a little longer."

"Laws, sir!" responded Jemima; "nothing won't keep it out. I think the salt sea is at the door."

"Do as I tell you," peremptorily commanded the young man; "we must gain time, if possible:" and then he began to organise the whole affair, telling off each helper to his or her own particular department. It was just what the girls had wanted, and all the movable goods in the dining-room and the best parlour—even the piano—were safely conveyed to the upper rooms. Then the library shelves were incontinently emptied into large clothes baskets, fetched by Jem from the laundry, and their contents poured out upon the bedroom floors with very little ceremony; but as the last freight of books was being hauled upstairs, the water overpowered the frail bulwarks, and burst like the tide into the hall. The schoolroom piano had to be left to its fate.

By the time all this was done, and a way to and fro just cleared upstairs, it was almost eight o'clock. Mrs. Darlington was nearly fainting, nor was Miss Argles in a much better plight. The girls, too, were sadly exhausted after such unwonted toil. All thoughts turned naturally to a cup of tea. Deborah had run up with the tea-tray, and a plate of bread-and-butter, at the first alarm, and there was plenty of tea in the store-room, which, fortunately, was on the bedroom story; but no one had thought of teapot or kettle, and hot water seemed about as unattainable as the costly wine of Tokay, or the fabled draught of the fountains of Lethe, and the kitchens were now more than a foot deep in

water—indeed, the entire ground-floor was submerged, and the cellars were as full as ponds.

“Where is the teapot?” asked Mr. Anderson. “I must go down to see if my punt is safe and the sculls secure; and I cannot be much wetter than I am. Come downstairs as far as you can, young ladies, and I will hand up to you all I can lay hold of.”

And the young minister was as good as his word; he secured not only the teapot and kettle, but the coffee-pot and plate-basket, as well as some knives and forks; and the last happy thought came to him, as he stood knee-deep, and caught sight of several lamps, evidently ready-trimmed, and only waiting to be lighted. They had candles upstairs, he knew; but the stock might be limited, and of candlesticks there were certainly not too many. So he waded laboriously through the flood, and carried successively three of the lamps to where Clare and Tessie were waiting to receive them.

“Oh, thank you a thousand times!” said Clare, as she received the last welcome illuminator; “now we shall be able to see what we are doing. I wonder none of us thought of it earlier.”

“But what about a fire?” inquired the practical Mr. Anderson. “Where is the coal-cellar? Is it possible to get to it?”

“I am afraid not; and happily there is no need of trying. Fortunately, Cousin Margery ordered the scuttles to be filled in the bedrooms a fortnight ago; we have had fires upstairs several times, for we were afraid of the damp; Miss Argles and Lina are lighting a fire in Ralph’s room—that grate draws the easiest.”

And then Edith came to say that a fire was lighted also in her mother’s room, and she begged Mr. Anderson to avail himself of it, and change his wet clothes. There was a suit of the miller’s waiting for him. And Mr. Anderson, who was not altogether of an amphibious nature, had no objection to the proposed arrangement. He was really thankful to be relieved of his soaked and heavy garments, and while he was thus occupied, the girls were glad to shut themselves into their rooms, and make the needful altera-

tions in their own draggled toilets. Afterwards hot tea and coffee were served out for the general refreshment, but only the maid-servants, Jem, and Lina, found an appetite for the bread-and-butter.

Nothing now remained to be done ; they could only sit still, and listen to the splash and sobbing of the waters downstairs, and to the sullen roar without. Edith and Tessie tried to persuade their mother to lie down on her own bed and take some rest ; but that was impossible, for neither Mr. Darlington nor the young men had made any sign, and all that Mr. Anderson could report was to the effect that he had seen both Ralph and Philip hard at work at some elaborate wooden construction the purpose of which he could not divine. They seemed too much occupied with their work to explain it ; but Philip had bade him go on to the house, and lend a helping hand there should it be needed ; and that it should be needed was only too probable. Mr. Darlington had not made his appearance, nor Dick ; and, somehow, Charles had gathered the fact that, by order of the master, all the men had left the building.

Mrs. Darlington's anxiety was so painful that Mr. Anderson volunteered to make a voyage to the Mill, and bring back tidings of the absentees. But when at last he succeeded in reaching the place where his punt was supposed to be, he found, to his dismay, that the unwieldy thing had somehow slipped from its moorings, and floated off, he could not imagine whither.

For a moment he thought of swimming—the long passage which connected the Mill itself, with the Mill House, being quite inaccessible, and as he had good reason for believing, partly washed away ; but Charles Anderson was not much of a swimmer, and a far greater expert than himself could scarcely have accomplished the daring feat. He looked out across the waste of inky waters streaked with foam ; it had ceased to rain, and the moon, only a day or two past the full, was wading through a sea of black, angry-looking clouds—the outlook was doleful in the extreme. He could see no trace of his punt, but not many yards from the door all sorts of rubbish were being borne along on the raging

current, and he wondered whether the animals were securely housed. He could only go back, once more thoroughly drenched, and with the news that their one hope of escape had eluded them.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE MIDNIGHT VOYAGE.

“ But there’s a tide remains at last
To pass, when all the rest are past ;
And deep to deep proclaims afar
That death’s dark billows mighty are.
Yet Thou, who mightier art to save,
Didst cross that Jordan’s parted wave,
And bear into the land of rest
The graven jewels on Thy breast.
Where Thou hast trod, we, too, will go,
For there no floods shall overflow :
With us in the waters be,
Libera nos Domine.”

TEN o’clock had struck, and yet no news arrived from the Mill; but it was a little consolation to the anxious watchers to see that lights were still shining from several of the windows, reflecting dim, fitful rays on the dark troubled waters beneath. Meanwhile the flood was rising, not very rapidly, perhaps, but still so steadily and unmistakably, that the increase was past question. The sky had cleared as the moon mounted towards the zenith, though great banks of heavy, sullen cloud still lay heavily on the western horizon, and ever and anon the dazzling brightness was effaced, and sombre darkness reigned over all the scene. And from far and near came the sound of the raging hill torrents, and, as it would seem, the loud tumble of angry waves and a stormy sea, the confused noise of an advancing, yet distant tide.

The family had congregated now in Clare’s room, because it commanded the best view of the Mill and of the vale itself. All eyes were bent in the direction whence might be

expected some signal ; but only could be seen the wide expanse of ebon waters streaked with foam, and now and then glimpses of some kind of *débris* borne swiftly along by the irresistible current. Something that looked ominously like the portion of an old thatched roof floated rapidly by ; and then Clare exclaimed that “*boats* were coming.”

Something there certainly was, tossing wildly on the furious current, now drifting into calmer waters, and now drawn back into the vortex which marked the changed course of the once peaceful river Allan ; but the something made way, notwithstanding, and, in a few minutes, one boat and a strange raft of some kind, lashed together, and approaching the house, were apparent. And there were living creatures on the raft and in the boat ; the latter of which, doing its utmost to stem the furious tide, was steered by some one who seemed, even at a distance, to Clare to present the tall figure and stalwart attitude of Philip Warner. As the boat drew near she was sure of it, and the rowers were Ralph and Dick. Their father also was with them, but he was neither steering nor helping with the oars. Several people were on the raft, which was being towed behind. Clare threw up the window and saluted the arrivals. Philip from the helm responded. “All right?” he shouted, with an interrogative wave of his hand.

“All safe,” was Clare’s reply ; “but deep in water.” In a moment the boat was beneath the window, and Mr. Anderson went down to assist the voyagers to alight, as best they might. The boat contained Mr. Darlington, his sons, and Philip Warner ; on the raft were an old couple and their granddaughter, also Mr. William Thwaites, for the last seven years foreman at the Mill.

“My father has had a blow,” said Dick, as he aided him to land—if that could be called “landing,” which consisted in wading through two feet of turbid water for some distance, before dry ground could be attained.. “He would help us rescue old Hudson and his wife, and little Polly—they were all but drowned, and the whole place tumbled to pieces before we could push off, so we came in for no inconsiderable portion of the *débris*, and a biggish rafter fell across father’s shoulders.”

"Is he hurt much?" asked Edith, who was pressing forward, almost into the water. "Oh, what will mother say?" And at the same instant Mrs. Darlington, who had indistinctly heard her eldest son's speech, came on to the last dry step, and would have advanced further, as she saw that both Dick and Ralph were supporting their father; but Mr. Darlington waved her back, crying, cheerily, "Not much the matter, sweetheart; I think I am a little stunned, and not a little stupefied; the thing gave me such a crack on the pate. I am not really hurt, but I want to lie down, and I should be all the better for a glass of wine, or a drop of brandy. I can dispense with the water, for I have had too much of it already."

Mrs. Darlington, though pale and trembling, was immediately on the alert, and she helped Philip Warner to relieve the miller of his wet clothes and place him on his own bed, while Clare helped cook and the old nurse to succour the drenched and terrified Hudsons and their frightened grandchild, who, as they presently discovered, had been snatched from a watery grave just as they had relinquished all hope of rescue. It was another hour before the party had subsided, and the poor old Hudsons, exhausted and worn out, had fallen into a comfortable sleep, after being refreshed with some of the contents of the removed larder, when Philip came into the room where Mr. Anderson and the young ladies were, and said, very gravely, "I hope no one will think of undressing; I am afraid it behoves us all to be ready for action at a moment's notice."

"Notice of *what*?" asked Edith, with a blanched face, though too well she knew what might be apprehended.

"I do not like to frighten you," returned Philip, "but I have been round the house making a close inspection. If the waters were at once to commence to recede we might, perhaps, escape with no further damage than we have at present sustained; but if the tidal wave that has been talked about all day should come our way, as seems to be generally apprehended, the *dam* must give way, and then our only chance of life will be to trust to the boats, and escape as best we may."

"Will the boats, indeed, prove of any service?" asked Charles Anderson, seriously.

"Only God knows," was Philip's solemn rejoinder. "He is our sole stay, and He can deliver us. I must say that our one resource is a very poor one; but, still, I think it is our duty to strain every nerve to preserve our lives; we must take to the boats—or drown."

"But, Philip, that one boat will never hold us all," replied the young man; "it is not meant to carry more than two or three persons. I thought it perilously weighted as it was, especially in such rough water. As for the raft, I only wonder it held together so long; it is not safe."

"Ah, but a little effort on our part will make it safe, and Ralph and Dick are lashing it more securely together at this moment. There is another boat, too, safely moored under the wall of the Mill. Now, I propose, Charlie, that you and I take the boat we came in and at once fetch the other one; it is a flat-bottomed affair, and will hold at least eight persons without risk. I brought it up from Scarth myself this morning. The two boats and the raft will carry us all; the only question is whether heavy-laden boats, or boats under any circumstances, can *live* in such a raging deluge."

"It is our only alternative," replied Mr. Anderson; "nothing else remains to us, and our lives are in God's hands. If He wills it, He can bring us to the haven where we would be as safely as if it were a tranquil summer evening. Come, I am ready. There is no time to lose, for the waters rise apace; in another hour, too, it will be flood-tide. The young ladies will hold themselves in waiting."

"Edith, is the danger *really* so great?" asked Clare, when the young men had disappeared. "What is the worst that can happen if we stay where we are?"

"If the dam gives way, the Mill itself must almost certainly be swept away. Ralph whispered to me that it is not safe now; the piles on which it rests are dislodged; the machine-room totters to its fall; and the private passage has been down these two hours."

"But the *house*? Surely that is not in danger?"

"Clare, you know how very old it is. After the last

flood it had to be strengthened ; and that flood was nothing compared with this most awful visitation."

" Still, we are in the best part of the house ? "

" Certainly we are ; these rooms and passages might defy many a wild storm yet, but not the shock of the resistless waves.. We never anticipated anything like this. But, Clare, we must talk no longer ; we must *act*. My father is not able to exert himself, and my mother is so deeply absorbed in his state that she has forgotten the imminent peril. I must go to them, and warn them of what *may* be coming ; do you and Tessie undertake Miss Argles and the servants ; and those two poor old people must be instructed to hold themselves in preparation. Lina, you might collect some shawls and blankets, to be in readiness should we require them, and we had better, if we can, have some wine and brandy with us in the boats."

Presently the young men came back ; they had succeeded in securing the reserve boat, and the raft was reported to be as seaworthy as it could be made. The girls had performed their mission, and all together were quietly awaiting the dread moment which should signal their departure. The difficulty now was to embark, for the water had risen so much that the lower part of the house was full, and there was no longer egress by any door, even by deep wading. The two boats and the frail raft were all fastened, as securely as could be, to the outside of the window in Edith's room. It afforded an easy passage, for it opened scarcely a foot above the floor ; and it was agreed on all hands that, when the water rose within a few inches of the window-ledge, they should leave the house, and trust themselves to the mercy of the waves.

All rejoiced that the horrors of actual darkness were not added to their distress ; and the miller—still feebly resting on the bed, but as fully equipped as might be for his compulsory voyage—devoutly thanked God for the bright shining of the moon, which spread her clear, mellow light over all the desolation around, and revealed to them the path they must take and the dangers they must endeavour to elude. In that room and Tessie's, adjoining, all the household were assembled ; from time to time the young men

essayed to strengthen the moorings of their little craft, and Clare walked continually to her own window, watching the progress of the deluge, and the state of the now deserted Mill.

"Children, let us pray together once more," said Mr. Darlington, as he sat, with folded hands upright on the pillows. "No; I cannot be priest any longer—I cannot *think*—my senses waver. One of you boys *pray*."

It was Mr. Anderson who obeyed the miller's behest, and earnestly he besought the Lord to grant them deliverance, if it were His good pleasure, and bring them altogether to some safe place of refuge.

"Only, oh, our Father," he concluded, "if Thou wilt call us from this world, here and now, take us to *Thyself*. Thy will be done. Pardon all our manifold transgressions, and receive us into the mansion which Thou hast prepared for Thy children who put their trust in Thee. Be with us in the swellings of Jordan; calm our poor human fears, and fill our hearts with the peace which Thou hast promised to Thy loved ones. We are, we trust, one in Christ, and one with Thee. Oh, grant that we may mingle song and praise before Thy throne. To Thee we commend our spirits; if we live, or if we die, oh, let us be *Thine*—Thine eternally. Our only hope, our only trust, is in Thy love and mercy. Receive us, oh, Saviour; though deep call unto deep, abide Thou with us; now, and for evermore. For Thy Name's sake. Amen."

No one rose. They knelt still in silent supplication. Then Clare's voice was heard, "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee. The floods have lifted up their voice, O Lord, the floods lift up their waves; the Lord on high is mightier than the noise of many waters. For thine, O Lord, is the Kingdom, and the power and the glory, for ever."

Scarcely had the clear tones died away than a sound like hoarse thunder smote upon their ears. They looked; and, lo! a mighty wave was advancing upon them, and the sound was indeed like that "of many waters." Should they be listening, ere many moments elapsed, to "the everlasting

song"? Edith and Tessie, who had gone to Clare's window, saw that the Mill tottered ; the sea was upon them. Surely the dreaded tidal-wave had risen, and forced the vast volume of water up the valley ! Was this the peaceful Allan Water that had erst flowed so sweetly between its green and flowery banks ? But the Mill-dam was still intact, as by a miracle its enclosure was preserved.

Louder and louder grew the awful booming of the water, which came like a wall up the bed of the foaming river ; and at the same time Philip perceived that a large wave was lapping over the window-ledge ; the floor of the room in which they were assembled was no longer dry. There was not a moment to be lost ; it would soon be impossible to get into the boats. As the miller and his wife were safely deposited a second wave broke over the carpet, the old people and the servants hurried on to the raft ; the girls, Miss Argles, and old nurse took refuge with Mr. and Mrs. Darlington ; the young men, including William Thwaites, filled the smaller boat. The water was literally pouring through the open window as Philip Warner and Ralph simultaneously severed the last cables which held the adventurous little fleet to its temporary moorings.

With a silent prayer they set out, Philip and Charles Anderson leading the way ; there were no wild shrieks, no exclamations of terror, as they passed into the pallid moonlight ; only the young kitchen-maid wept piteously, and Jem wrung his hands, as he thought of his favourite horses drowning in the angry flood. The cook and Deborah exclaimed, incessantly, "Oh, Lord, have mercy upon us ! Good Lord, deliver us !" But no one else uttered a sound ; they communed with the Master, and were still, save, perhaps, poor Lina, who was almost unconscious, and lay motionless and nearly helpless at Edith's feet.

It seemed expedient to steer the course of their frail barks as far away from the Mill as was possible, without encountering the force of the main current. The young men pulled with all their strength, shoulder to shoulder, and Edith and Tessie had each her oar. Those on the raft were armed with hastily improvised *paddles*, which helped somewhat to regulate their devious course. All three vessels

were firmly lashed together, and each made the best speed it could ; but after at least a quarter of an hour's hard toil, a very short distance only had been accomplished, the wind and the stream being both dead against them.

They had started with the intention of steering their course to the little hamlet of Scarth, where there would be certainly dry land and houses far above the highest water-mark ; but very soon it was apparent that they must relinquish their intention and take the opposite direction, with wind and resistless current in their favour.

"We must steer for Greenleas," said Mr. Anderson, as they prepared to alter their path ; "it is farther than Scarth, but our strength will soon be exhausted in vain endeavour ; we must run the risk of the floating rubbish on the way, and take the chance, too, of the bursting forth of the dam."

"Nothing can save us if that breaks," interposed Dick ; "we shall be overwhelmed with all that water on our track."

"Still," urged both Ralph and Philip, "we *may* succeed in getting safely aground before the flood follows us ; and we might struggle for hours the contrary way. It was only by straining every nerve and sinew that Anderson and I got over the few yards between us and the Mill, when we went to bring the punt. Ah, this is far easier work ; all we have to do is to steer carefully, and take care of shoals ahead and in our rear."

And, indeed, this sort of danger was very far from inconsiderable, and had it been dark instead of moonlight, nothing—humanly speaking—could have prevented them from suffering shipwreck from sudden encounters with the rubbish with which the broad stream was laden. The current was bearing all before it ; large trees had been uprooted, and were sailing wildly up the river ; cattle, corn, hay—partially stacked—wrecked houses, rafters, pieces of thatch, furniture, and the litter of farmyards—all and everything that could be imagined bore witness to the devastation of the last few hours.

The little flotilla barely escaped shocks that must have been fatal again and again. Now they just saved themselves from coming full tilt against the massive fragments

of a fallen roof ; now a mighty horned animal—a huge bull apparently—drifted right across their bows, and now something nondescript, but massive, just missed the fragile raft and its helpless human freight. A voyage across mid-ocean, when waves are running mountain-high, could scarcely have met with greater perils ; the journey was one series, almost unbroken, of hair-breadth, thrilling escapes from the moment of embarkation to that when they found themselves unexpectedly safe from “perils of water” in the middle of an upland meadow, which was only partially inundated. A sudden and quite unforeseen current had altered their direction, and, while they were vainly striving to tack, drove them almost on dry ground.

The great difficulty, of course, was to anchor the boats while the refugees could land ; but as the wave still drove inland their labour was lightened, and the whole wearied crew found themselves safely stranded, with only long wet grass under their feet, and a whole range of farm-buildings within easy distance. And when they came nearer the barns and the house itself both Charles Anderson and the Darlings顿 recognised it for Greenleas, where friends and neighbours resided. The Grahams were, in fact, the grandparents of Mr. Anderson, and his sister Susan was even then their guest. Having approached the homestead by a perfectly unfamiliar way they had not known it at first sight.

All the inhabitants of Greenleas were wide awake and about their business ; their own house was safe from the deluge, but they had had no small trouble to secure their cattle ; and the contents of a rick-yard on lower-ground was almost swept away. The family from the Abbey Mill were heartily welcomed, and they received the attentions they so sorely needed, the miller being at once installed in the comfortable guest-chamber, which Susan Anderson and her grandmother had made ready only a few hours before, feeling well assured that some poor fugitive would soon require their hospitality.

So now, drenched, storm-beaten—it might be, *ruined*—husband and wife could rest in peace, and return grateful thanks for their deliverance, and for the safety of their household and family.

All were accommodated to the best of the rather limited ability of the Grahams ; but when morning came, and a good, hot, substantial breakfast had been served round, it became necessary to think of what should be done next.

The first move was to view the course of the flood. Farmer Graham and all his male guests found their way, as soon as it was fully daylight, to the borders of the river. It was still in violent commotion, and the banks were nowhere to be discerned ; nevertheless, the waters were falling—there could be no doubt of that. The course of the waves, which could be traced to a certain boundary, had returned much nearer to their river-bed ; the fold-yard and the rick-yard were comparatively dry ; an empty barn, the contents of which had been hastily removed, was not even invaded. But then Greenleas was far more advantageously situated as regarded the Allan, and its possible overflowings, than was the Abbey Mill. Ralph and Dick shook their heads as they looked across the troubled water, and wondered sadly how things had gone on in their own territory.

"It is just possible that the Farm itself, so far as the house is concerned, may have been unvisited," said Philip, when they began to debate ; "let us go and see if we may haply find temporary refuge there, for we are quite too thick upon the ground at Greenleas. My uncle and aunt must, of course, be left behind ; William Thwaites and Jem had better accompany us ; the girls can join us presently, if the place be habitable."

The Home Farm was found very much as Philip had left it three or four days before ; his old housekeeper had transferred herself to securer quarters, as soon as the river began to rise ; the rooms felt chilly and damp, but the water had not advanced farther than the outside. The garden was a wreck, and the goodly meadows and wheat-fields were entirely submerged ; but here was every accommodation, so far as regarded space ; and the young men at once decided that the family had better remove themselves, without loss of time, and take up their abode in their own quarters—at any rate, till something more advisable could be arranged.

The worst feature of the place was its want of decent

furniture, and, indeed, of nearly every sort of convenience ; for Philip, who had never cared to take up his residence there, had only a counting-house and one parlour at all comfortable ; while the old woman, who professed "to do" for him, occupied a chamber in the roof, and spent her days in the wide and rather untidy kitchen, also at the service of the farm-labourers. A few chairs and tables, a venerable sideboard, an ancient bureau, and a roomy old couch, constituted nearly all the movables of the place. There were some cooking vessels, however, and plenty of plates and dishes, and iron spoons. The pigs were dead in their styes, and the poultry-yard was a scene of desolation—some of the poultry having flown, no one knew whither, and some, still faithful to old associations, pecking forlornly at the muddy deposit on the floor of the hen-house, unable to find a single grain.

But there was no time to waste in lamentations ; the Darlingtons would have a roof here, and their own roof, over their heads ; so it was agreed that Mr. Anderson should return to Greenleas immediately, acquaint Mrs. Darlington with their proposition, and escort the young ladies forthwith to the Home Farm. Meanwhile Dick and Ralph, aided by Jem, kindled fires in all the rooms, for, luckily, the coal-cellar had only just been replenished. Philip and William Thwaites occupied themselves with putting things into something like order, and deliberating on the best way to provide, at least, a few more seats and another table ; also it struck them that *beds* must be procured, if they meant to spend the night at the Home Farm ; and one and all they greatly needed the means of repose. They began to realise the sad position of the homeless and the way-worn wanderers, who are thankful for *any* shelter so they may lie down and rest their weary heads.

CHAPTER XXXV.

“MY QUEEN.”

“Morn on the mountain, like a summer bird,
Lifts up her purple wing, and in the vales
The gentle wind, a sweet and passionate wooer,
Kisses the blushing leaf, and stirs up life
Within the solemn woods of ash deep-crimsoned,
And golden beech, and maple yellow-leaved,
Where autumn, like a faint old man, sits down
By the wayside a-weary.”

THE flood was over ; the waters ebbed and ebbed, till finally they retired to their ancient and legitimate beds of river, stream, and brooklet ; but it was long before the familiar walks and meadow-lawns on the banks of the pleasant Allan Water regained their wonted aspect. The old Abbey Mill was *a ruin*, and the happy home of the Darlingtons was little better.

The “deserted wing,” as it was commonly called, had fallen to the ground, carrying with it a goodly portion of the back part of the inhabited building ; only the front rooms escaped, and some of these suffered terribly from the overwhelming deluge, which must have swept through them immediately on the departure of the family. As for the garden, with its trim borders and well-kept beds, its pleached alleys and broad gravel-walks, its wealth of fruit and flower, savoury herb and vegetables—it was, indeed, a *desolation*. No other word could describe the devastation which the waves had wrought ; there was scarce visible a trace of the beauty and order of which poor Mrs. Darlington had been so proud ; the sea itself might almost as well have swept over her husband’s goodly heritage.

Two months passed sadly yet rapidly away ; the miller rallied, but very slowly, and the doctor, though he spoke hopefully to the anxious wife and daughters, told Philip Warner that there was but little probability of actual and permanent recovery. Mr. Darlington “ ‘ was not as young

as he was,' and he had led a laborious and rather trying life ; a man between fifty and sixty could scarcely be expected to rally from the shock, and throw off the effects of the injuries he had sustained, as if he were twenty years his own junior."

He was especially forbidden to exert himself in any way ; perfect repose, both of body and mind, was strictly enjoined ; and the less he concerned himself about any earthly thing, the better. Very pleasant advice, undoubtedly, and excellent as far as it went, but so utterly impossible for a ruined man to follow. The sons, and Philip, and William Thwaites, were all solicitous to do their very best—they would neglect nothing ; they would grudge no pains, no energies, they would devote themselves with all possible vigour of body and of mind to the restoration of the family prosperity ; but then, after all, what could be done without the head ? how could affairs be expected to succeed when the mainspring of the machinery was at an utter standstill ?

After a few days the Farm was rendered just habitable. All that was not absolutely destroyed in the Mill House was made to do duty in the unwonted and rather comfortless home that remained to the fugitives. Mr. and Mrs. Darlington left the Greenleas as soon as the state of the former warranted removal. Miss Argles, sorely against her will, but feeling that, in the present state, her room was certainly preferable to her company, betook herself, even before her holidays were ended, to her duties at the Academy. Lina was carried off by the Andersons, who would fain have received Clare as their guest had she not obstinately refused to desert her cousins.

Charles Anderson went back to London, but not without a promise from Edith that *some day*, when things were better with her own dear kith and kin, she would consent to share the toils and responsibilities of the pastor of the Beaufort Church. It was a dreary betrothal, yet not altogether dreary, for the minister and his bride-elect were young ; life with all its glorious possibilities was before them, and they could hope with the steadfast and sanguine trust of youth, that sees naturally the rainbow amid the storm. So they parted, with a happy tranquil confidence in the future which

God was keeping in store for them ; they had faith in Him and in each other ; they had but to wait in patience till the way they had elected to tread should be made straight and plain before them, till the time came for the fruition of their desires. With the fullest consent of parents and friends on both sides, the affianced couple parted, each one to undertake with heart and soul the duties of the present hour.

As for Clare, she began to be painfully exercised in her mind as regarded herself ; had she any *right* to remain a burden on her cousins' family ? was it not her duty to go out into the world, and earn her own livelihood by sweat of brow, and brain, as best she could ? There was no work for her to do, Edith and Tessie could give all necessary help in nursing their father, and attending to domestic duties ; all the women servants, except old nurse and the rough-and-ready Jemima, were sent away ; it was clearly a matter of moment to diminish household expenses generally, and the fewer mouths to fill the better—especially such mouths as could be otherwise satisfied by the exertions of their own possessors.

“I do not cost very much,” was Clare’s reflection, as she weighed the *pros* and *cons* in her own mind before taking counsel with Edith or Tessie ; “still, every little must be of some consequence, and though there are many trifling services that I can and do render, they are not actually required of me ; I am not wanted here, and I am sure I *ought* not to add the cost of my maintenance, small though it be, to the burdens that must press so heavily upon poor dear Cousin Robert. But how foolish I am ; I *need not* be a burden, after all ; why not put my little income into the general treasury ? and my small savings, too, might go the same way. How very stupid I was not to think of it before ; then I should, at least, be independent ; for what Aunt Stewart used to call my ‘keep’ cannot be considerable. I have still a fair stock of clothes, and many of my dresses are unspoiled—that lovely black and silver robe is the only one that is irremediably ruined, and I can do very well without it. As for that handsome velvet, and my other winter costumes, and my furs, they are really none the worse ; what a good thing I persisted in putting them away into that

dry garret, which the water never reached. Then there are the proceeds of my literary work. I am pretty sure of being able to earn enough by my pen alone to supply me with all that I shall personally require, and to help Edie and Tessie, whose wardrobes were not nearly so extensive as mine, and fared worse into the bargain. And I am afraid poor Lina will scarcely have a dress to put on before the winter is over ; it will be a genuine case of ‘nothing to wear,’ ere long, with all of my cousins. And in one way or another I do think I shall be able to help them. After all, I need not perplex myself. I am best where I am, as I am ; and I can write better here than elsewhere ; and who knows but that one day I may find myself quite a popular authoress, and able to earn money enough to help Cousin Robert effectually ? ”

So Clare wisely concluded not to trouble herself any further on the score of her own expenses ; but that very evening she took her half-year’s income, received at Mid-summer, as yet untouched, and walked into the room where Mr. and Mrs. Darlington were sitting together, and explained to them, not without some embarrassment, how she proposed that money matters should be arranged, and how the difficulties which had presented themselves to her own mind should be removed for the future. “ For you see, cousins,” she said, as she smilingly handed over her little store, “ I could not, with any degree of propriety, be any further expense as things are ; I could not, you know, reconcile it to my conscience to add to your burdens by ever so small a sum ; so, if you will not take my income, and *more*—if I can add to it—you will drive me away from you, and I shall have to look out for some sort of situation, in spite of my excessive disinclination to leave the banks of the happy Allan Water. I was never so happy as I have been since I left my Cousin Forest ; my home here with you, Robert and Margery, satisfies me entirely.”

“ Ah, child,” returned Robert, a little plaintively, “ but *this* is not the home we once asked you to share ; and it behoves you seriously to reflect, and question yourself, as to the expediency of throwing in your lot with people so unfortunate as we are—so deeply visited by calamity.”

“ I have reflected, Cousin Robert, and I have asked God to guide me in coming to a prudent and just determination; and after prayer, and mature deliberation, it seems to me that I cannot do *better for myself* than remain with you on the terms I have mentioned. I shall be happier than in any other position, and I can prosecute my literary labours with greater ease than elsewhere. With you, I shall be *free*—as I ever have been—and I hope to turn to greater and greater account the talent a good God has been pleased to bestow upon me. I should be wretched if you refused to allow me to add my quota to the family exchequer.”

“ But I do not refuse, dear child; my wife and I were talking, not an hour ago, over the vexed question of ways and means. We cannot afford any longer to keep our own children in idleness. Nay, Margery, I know the girls never have been *idle*, in any sense of the word; I used the term wrongly—what I meant was that we are no longer justified in allowing them to remain as young ladies at home, contributing nothing to their father’s income. We must dispense with their loving and filial services as far as we can, and they must earn a little money for themselves; their labours henceforth must be *profitable*. So, my dear Clare, the mother and I gratefully accept your offer for the present; should better days come—should it please the Lord to visit us once more with prosperity, things may—nay, they *shall*—be otherwise ordered. I have felt so much better this week, that our hopes begin slightly to revive.”

“ Thank you, Cousin Robert—thank you. I shall feel so perfectly at rest if I may hand over to you, as I receive them, my half-yearly dividends. But that is not quite *all*; I have just one thing more to say, and you must promise me, please, not to be offended. You know I had no use for my money while I was with Lady Forest; she honourably gave me the salary for which I bargained before I consented to act as Miss Argles’ successor, and, at the same time, she paid all my expenses, great and small, and persisted on discharging my every liability. So that when I returned to the Mill I found myself very much richer than when I left it; I had, as Cousin Margery knows, a marvellously well-plenished wardrobe—I really believe I shall not *need* to spend five

pounds on clothes for the next five years. Also, I had, what is of much more consequence, nearly *a hundred pounds*. Now, that you must take, Cousin Robert, and use it as you see best in the present emergency ; you must want money for so many little things just now, I am sure ; and though a hundred pounds is not much, every little does help, and I shall quarrel with you desperately if you say *no*."

" My dear, it may be—I do not say it absolutely will be—swallowed up in a very maelstrom of debts and difficulties. Nearly all I had has been swept away—I am almost *destitute*. I was just solvent, and that was all, when the crisis came ; the depression of trade, and unprosperous seasons, had greatly crippled my resources. Now, I am in as bad condition as can be ; my mill is gone, my dear old house is gone, my household goods are woefully diminished. Philip is able, by dint of many sacrifices, *just* to keep his head above water—not much more, for he has suffered too, and his liabilities are manifold. So, I am not sure that I ought to take your hundred pounds."

" Yes, you ought, and you *must*. All you say convinces me that it is your duty to accept it as a free gift, if you only will. If you will not, as a loan to be repaid whenever you can quite easily spare it. Be sure that I shall never ask you for it, never wish for it. No one but our three selves must ever know anything about it ; it is, and must remain, a dead secret between you and Cousin Margery and myself. No, I will take no sort of acknowledgment ; I have heard of very informal documents doing no end of mischief through coming into hands for which they never were intended."

" Well, my dear, then I will take your hundred pounds, for God knows I am sorely in need of a little money just at present. At least, it will help us to get back into the old house, into that part of it which may be rendered habitable at a moderate outlay ; the front part of the building is really uninjured, I am assured, and can be put into decent and comfortable repair for a comparatively trifling sum."

" It would take a great deal of money to restore the Mill to working order ? "

" Much more than a hundred pounds, my dear ; a friend

who understands the business, is making an estimate of what the rebuilding and the rehabilitation of the machinery would cost, and he *thinks* he knows of other friends who would advance all that might be required for the necessary expenditure, at a very moderate rate of interest, and on easy terms. But I cannot tell you how I dread the burden of debt, especially in the present state of my health. That, however, is my sons' affair as much as my own ; and Philip, who has already risked so much, has every right to be consulted, and to form his own opinion. The boys have always looked to succeed me in the Abbey Mill, as I succeeded my father and my grandfather before me, and it will be very hard on them to have to hire themselves—to sell their services to alien masters, however considerate and kind. Next to my wife and children I have loved the Mill ; I have dearly loved my humble inheritance. On the afternoon of that awful day, when I first comprehended that the danger was not only inevitable, but imminent, I felt that my heart would break. It seemed too much to bear ; and in the anguish of the hour, when I saw the great beams giving way, and the timbers starting, and the whole building tottering to its fall, I scarcely wished to escape the coming desolation. I felt almost content to die there and then, and something akin to despair possessed my soul. Oh, I was very blind and foolish—ay, and cowardly.”

“Nay, dear, I will not have you call yourself bad names,” said Mrs. Darlington, soothingly ; “you were deeply, bitterly tried, and it was not so very strange that you should falter for a moment. You were very soon yourself again, my own dear husband, and you were whispering comfort and courage to me long before the worst was over. And I think, Robert, it was, perhaps, God's way of trying you, that you might come forth like gold from the refiner's furnace. You will be the better Christian, the nobler and grander man, because the waters have, in verity, gone over your head, I am convinced. And I—I am quite sure I shall love you more than ever, if, indeed, that be possible.”

“Thank God for the ties that *He* has blessed,” said the miller, devoutly. “A good wife is, indeed, from the Lord ; and how much those words, ‘a good wife,’ imply. I cannot

wish my boys any happiness greater than has been their father's in his married life. Wife, I am ashamed to remember how willingly I would have left you to mourn and struggle without me. But the cloud passed—I thank God it passed, and quickly too. For your dear sake, I gladly return to life's duties, and breast the waves once more, confident that strength will be given according to my need. You, too, have done me good, Clare, my dear. Yes, I will take your money ; and doubt not it will be paid back to you with interest beyond what you can conceive : for God loves a cheerful giver, and you will reap in a far greater degree than you sow, even in these mundane furrows."

Clare felt wondrously content and satisfied now that she had made this "paction" with her cousins, and she set to work again at her writing with redoubled energy, and succeeded so well that she was almost ashamed at feeling buoyant and gleesome while so much trouble and care were still weighing down the spirits of those she loved so well. Tessie had quite decided to take a situation as soon as one could be procured ; her French and German, thanks to Clare, were now very far from despicable, and she had learned from her cousin not a little of the theory of music, while she was practising with her. She was not too fond of teaching, she privately confessed ; "but then," as she concluded, "I may like it better as I go on with it, and I shall try my utmost to like it, so that my heart may be in the work which I am pretty sure is given me by God. And, besides, it is the only way in which I *can* earn a decent living : the only task which I can conscientiously undertake."

Edith was still to remain at home ; she would find abundance of occupation in helping her mother, waiting on her father, and supplementing the services of old nurse, and the willing, though untrained, Jemima. Lina was to return, as soon as possible, and study hard, under Clare's supervision ; in a few months' time she hoped to be qualified for the post of pupil-teacher, so as to prepare herself for the required examinations which must be passed, in order to obtain the "certificates" which are every day becoming more and more essential to the career of a high-class governess.

And while all this was being arranged, two months, as I

said, passed quietly, yet in some measure, hopefully away. The young Darlings, “the boys”—among whom Philip was always included—and the girls, also, evinced the most praiseworthy spirit; not one of them tried to shirk the burdens that Providence had so manifestly imposed, or indulged in open complaint; on the contrary, they made the very best of untoward circumstances, turning aside the sharp-edge of many a little trouble, and depriving many an annoyance of its sting, by a pleasant jest; and bravely, one and all, putting their shoulders to the wheel.

One fine wintry morning in November Clare, with her pencil and tablets in her pocket, strolled away in the direction of her old ruined home on the peaceful Allan Water. Yes; the river was calm enough now, though vast tracts of land on the Duston side of the banks were still defaced with tangles of drift, and deposits of an alluvial nature; but the stream flowed quietly in its accustomed bed, the hill torrents were swollen no longer, and the rivulets passed almost silently through the nearly leafless woods. A few leaves lingered on the trees, and the red foliage of the magnificent beeches in the Mill gardens was, as Clare decided, “a thing of beauty,” and the memory of it would be to her “a joy for ever.”

The air was sharp, the grass crisp underfoot, the sky was gloriously clear, and of that deep blue so seldom seen in our humid climate; it was, in fact, one of those ideal days that occur sometimes in late autumn, when the touch of winter’s frosty fingers are first laid gently and, as it were, lovingly on the dying woodlands.

Clare walked across the lawn and towards the house, and as she approached the shattered dining-room window Philip stepped from it on to the gravel terrace. “Did I startle you?” he asked, kindly, and there was a softness in his tone that reminded her of the sweet early summer-days that were so dear and pleasant to her remembrance.

“No,” she answered; “though I had not the least expectation of meeting any one here. I came, in fact, to think over the next chapter of the tale that is promised to Mr. Grey.”

"Well," he resumed, and there was a slight hesitancy in his speech as if he were a little nervous, "*I* came here of *malice prepense*, for my aunt told me where you were, and I thought—I thought, Clare, I would follow you, and say to you what I have to say. I told you the same story in yonder garden, under those pear-trees, and you would not listen ; *do you recollect?*"

"Of course I do, and—and——"

"I have made up my mind to speak once more. Forgive me, if I annoy you—if you tell me to be silent I will hold my peace, now and for ever ; but, Clare, I *have* hoped—I could not help it. May I go on hoping ? I cannot ask you to marry me, *now*, as I did that August evening, before the troubles came, for I am a poor man, comparatively speaking, and my bride will have to wait for me. It may be months, even years, before I can claim her, for I have thrown in my lot with my aunt and uncle, who have been as mother and father to me from my infancy. Still, I must say now—I will never trouble you again, dear—I must say that I love you with all my heart, and that if *you* will not relent and make me happy—the happiest of men—I shall never ask any other woman to be my wife. Oh, Clare, will you not speak ?"

But no words were needed, for she put her hands into his, and smiled upon him with a fulness and radiance that would admit of only one interpretation. It was enough ; the shadow of doubt passed away at once and for ever, and she was folded in her lover's arms, and the kiss of betrothal was pressed upon her lips—her virgin lips, that had never before known the touch of lover's lips.

As they sat together in the ruined schoolroom Clare confessed that she had made a sad mistake "*that first time.*" And she had been more or less unhappy ever since. "For I knew that same night," she added, "how great an error I had committed. I had been looking for my King, keeping all the hidden treasures of my heart for *him*, guarding jealously, for his sake, lips, and hands, and glances; and lo ! he came—he, and no other—and I knew him not. I flouted him, I spurned him, as if he had been only another Pretender. If you had never spoken again, Philip, I should

have mourned my King always ; but I should have lived and died unwedded."

"Thank God that I took courage and ventured my fate once more, and so found the one woman in all the world for me—*my Queen*."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AN UNEXPECTED SUMMONS.

"My sands are numbered that make up my life."

THE engagement into which Philip and Clare had just entered gave to every member of the Darlington family the profoundest satisfaction. Edith was in no way surprised, her own recent experiences had sharpened her perceptions, and she whispered to Clare that for days past she had been reserving her congratulations, only wondering when would strike the eventful hour, and when would be announced the news, for which she was so patiently waiting. And then they laughed softly over the little mistake which Tessie had made about Margaret Anderson, who was really, as Clare confessed, a very charming and delightful young woman ; only Philip Warner was not, and never had been, at all in love with her.

"I think I could tell you a secret," responded Edith ; "I must beg you to be quite silent for the present, and for reasons which I am sure you will agree with me to be prudent ones. But for the accumulation of disaster which has fallen upon us so recently and so overwhelmingly, I think there would have been a third betrothal in the family. I know my brother Dick contemplated proposing to Margaret ; and, without unduly compromising my friend, I think I may say that he would not have been refused. But our last and crowning misfortune puts an end to everything for the present."

"Well, I do not see why Dick and Margaret should not enjoy the happiness of belonging to each other, at least. Philip and I have no thought of marriage yet awhile ; this is not a time for marrying and giving in marriage ; but there is no earthly reason why people should not come to an understanding. It makes one's term of bliss so much longer ; one is able to anticipate so much."

"At any rate, I am glad that Charlie spoke when he did. He wanted me to go with him almost directly ; he pleaded that a pastor without a good wife is only half a pastor ; and I agree with him that a protracted engagement in such cases is inexpedient. But I was confident that for the present my duty lay at home. Indeed, I could not endure to think of father and mother struggling on against such adverse fate unaided, and I was going to say, without *daughterly* protection. For father will need nursing and cosseting for a long while, and mother will have enough to do in attending to him, if, indeed, her own health, after so many shocks, do not break down. We shall see, please God, what another twelve months will bring forth ; and as you are to make your home with us permanently, and become, through marriage, doubly one of ourselves, there will be the better chance for Charlie and me."

"I was thinking that might be the case, as Philip and I were hurrying back to dinner, and he was telling me how his early scheme had been to rebuild the Home Farm entirely, and make it just such a house as we both could wish. He has been explaining everything to me, that I might fully understand his position ; and I perceive that though it was perfectly consistent his *speaking* when he did, he would not be justified just yet in thinking of marriage, or settling any further his own personal affairs. I shall be more than content to wait, and in the meantime perhaps—mind Edie, I only say *perhaps*, and I say it to you in confidence —my powers of authorship may develop ; I may become quite a moneyed woman, in a small way, and so gather up a few twigs and a little moss on my own account towards the weaving of the nest, that is, if it please God, one day to be our home."

"I see no reason why the woman should not do her part,

if she can, towards making all things fit and ready. It must be delightful to be able to work for the man you love ; I must be content and thankful for the privilege of working *with* him when the right time comes."

"I must tell you, Edie, that I have the most delicious scheme in my head for a thorough going three-volume new novel. The plot really came to me the day before yesterday ; but I have only just clearly seen my way to the working of it out, and I shall jot down a few rough notes before I go to bed. It is a blessing to have established settled relations with a firm like Mr. Grey's ; he is such a good man, and so strictly honourable—I might almost say generous. And he would never publish a line that did not, in some way or other, work for truth and righteousness."

They were still talking about Mr. Christopher Grey, and his superior merits, when they were interrupted by the little maid Jemima, who broke into tears, as with most penitent face she apologised for her intrusion at such an hour, as all the rest of the household were in bed.

"What is it? What has happened?" exclaimed both young ladies simultaneously, rather alarmed at such a preface.
"Does your mistress know you are up and about so late?"

"Oh, no ; I wanted to stop till morning, but nurse said the only amends I could make would be to come and confess my fault directly ; I'd better wake you if you was asleep, Miss Clare, for there was no knowing what mischief my forgetfulness might not have been the cause of. I am sure I do wish I was not quite so thoughtless ; cook that's gone away did use to say as I should be safe to lose my head, if it wasn't fixed on my shoulders, and I dare say I should ; for mother always told folks that I was that giddy-pated she was afraid I should never do any good for myself."

"Well, Jemima, what have you forgotten now? Do not talk any more, but tell me what is wrong, at once. Is it anything serious?"

"Please, ma'am, it's something as I have left undone as I ought to have done."

"Very well. Out with it, Jemima ! what is it you have left undone ? You will make me angry if you hesitate much longer."

"Please, ma'am, it's this here letter as come for you by post this very morning before dinner, and I just popped it into my dress-pocket, and never gave it another thought. When I cleaned myself afore tea, I jest slipped off my cotton gownd, and hung it up, without thinking like, and it was only just as I was comfortable in bed, and ready to drop off, that it came like a flash of lightning upon me, and I jumped up, and woke nurse up out of a sound sleep, and says—'Oh, whatever *did* I do with that there letter of Miss Clare's?' And nurse, she was ever so cross, and she says, 'Get up this minnit, you naughty girl, and look for it; haven't you been told times without number not to put letters into that dumb-well of a pocket of yours?' Then I remembered; and here it is. Miss Clare, not a bit the worse, for it was a sight smudged and crumpled when it come. But it has got written on it '*immejate*,' and that means delivered straight away—so nurse says."

"Well, now go to bed, and next time you have a letter not your own in your possession—'*immediate*' or not *immediate*—carry it to the person to whom it is addressed, neither laying it down nor putting it away."

"I'll be sure to remember, Miss Clare; but please is it really *immejate*? and is it any matter that I kept it all day in my pocket?"

"Go back to bed," replied Clare, extremely amused, for Jemima was evidently lingering in the hope of knowing something of the contents of the delayed epistle. Finding, however, that her curiosity was not going to be gratified, she slowly retired, scarcely knowing whether satisfaction at escaping a well-deserved scolding, or disappointment at being baulked in her thirst for information, was the predominant sentiment in her mind.

"The good-for-nothing little monkey," said Edith, when she had fairly shut the door; "I am always afraid to trust her to put the letters in the post, she is such a scatter-brained young damsel, though she is certainly well-disposed, and would not harm or vex one for the world. I hope, Clare, your letter is of no *immediate* consequence?"

"I can scarcely tell till I have read to the end; it is one

of Tarleton's lengthy effusions, and it is so badly written that I cannot very easily decipher it."

"Tarleton? Is she not Mrs. Weller?"

"It would seem not, for it is signed '*Tabitha Tarleton*.' However, I will begin at the beginning, and you shall hear the news, if you care, for I see it is dated from Lowndes Square. She writes: 'Dear and respected Miss Darlington,—I am in the old place again, you see, and my wedding is, as the papers would say, unavoidably postponed. I thought to have been Mrs. Weller long ago, but, as the Scriptures so beautifully say, Man proposes and God disposes—and I suppose woman is all the same. Weller took very badly just as the warm weather set in, and we had to wait patiently, for I wasn't going to bide single to my time of life, and then cumber myself with an invalid for a husband. But I couldn't put up with my lady any longer; so thinks I, maid, wife, or widow, I'll try a change; so I gave regular notice, and we parted quite friendly like, and I went to lodge for a bit with my sister that lives in Whitechapel. Weller, he is picking up now, and is so much improved that he has all but taken the very shop he has had his eye on all along; but, being a prudent person, I think I'd better wait a little, and be quite sure that he really is recovered enough to carry on a business; for I've no notion of being married and having to work and keep my husband—not I. If I can't be a lady, I'll be a lady's-maid *still*. So I've made Weller understand that though I am quite faithful and all that, I'd rather wait till after Christmas for putting up the banns, and he seems very well satisfied and in no hurry.'

"Well, Miss Clare, I'm bound to say I got tired of the tripe-shop and of the East-end generally; and I was just feeling a little put out, when I gets a queer written letter from my late lady saying as she was very poorly, and had dismissed her new maid, who was a dreadful impudent baggage, and was that ill the doctor came twice a day; and Mrs. Goswell was gone, and the cook, and the still-room maid, and *everybody*, except that little slut of a kitchen-maid, and that good-for-nothing sauce-box of a page; and would I come back to her for two or three weeks till she began to feel herself again? She offered very liberal wages, and I

might make my own terms. Of course I went, for the offer came just in the nick of time when I didn't know what was the next best step to take ; and here I've been, Miss Darlington, ever since the 12th of October, and my lady has got worse and worse for all the clever doctors that have attended her ; and now they as good as say she'll *never* recover ; and the other day the grand physician, that is all the rage in the fashionable world just now, advised her *to make her will*.

"She was in a terrible taking at first; and stormed at everybody, and declared she'd give up the old system and call in a *Homopathic* doctor. And so she did ; and the Homopathic man said he'd do all he could, but she was very ill indeed, and past the ordinary remedies. She persisted in it that nothing worse ailed her than an obstinate cold, and she got ever so angry with the Homopathic doctor, and wouldn't even take his nonsensical medicines that hadn't any taste to speak of ; and she determined to try what is called a *quack* doctor, who had the repute of raising people from their dying beds when all the proper faculty had given them over. Well, the quack gentleman all but poisoned her with his filthy herbs ; and her great friend, Miss Honeybun, would have her go over to the Hydropathetic persuasion. But that treatment is mostly cold water, you know, and it didn't answer ; and I had to get a proper bath-woman from an institootion as a sort of nurse, and I am sure it was a mercy we didn't all three die of the rheumatics. As if a bad cold that had all but settled on the lungs could be cured by dapping in cold water, and lying in wet sheets !

"And now she's so much worse that she's lost heart, and says she must see a clergyman ; but she can't make up her mind which of them she'll send for. And only yesterday, Miss Darlington, she burst out crying and sobbing, and bid me write to *you*, and say how shocking bad she was, and that her days was numbered, and wouldn't you come and close her eyes, for she'd rather see *you* than any other person in the wide world ! And this morning she's ever so much worse. I do believe she's pretty well coughed up her poor dear lungs, and can't last many days. 'Write to Clare,' says she, 'and tell her to come instantly ; tell her to start

to-day, for I can't die till I see her, and I am suffering so dreadfully that I don't care to live. Tell her I shall count the minutes and the seconds till she stands at my bedside ; and she needn't be afraid that I'll trouble her about the Dook. I'm past all that.' And so she is, Miss Darlington ; and I do beg you'll forget all her nasty ways to you, and come to her, poor soul ; and perhaps you can say a word of comfort to her, for she says she is such an awful sinner that God won't hear her, and won't save her soul.

"I remain, with duty, your obedient servant,
"TABITHA TARLETON."

"It is 'immediate,' indeed," said Clare, as she folded up the letter, and looked sadly at her cousin.

"What will you do?" asked Edith.

"I must go, of course ; you would all counsel me to go, I am sure. And Philip would be the last to detain me. Ah, if Jemima had only *not* kept the letter I might be on my way by this time ; and if we had but the wires a little nearer ! She will think I refuse to listen to her request. What am I to do, Edie ?"

"Get into bed directly, and go to sleep, if you can. Early in the morning you must write your message, and Philip will take it to Allan Bridge, and be there as soon as the telegraph office is open. You *can* do nothing to-night ; and rest will do you good, even if sleep be out of the question."

Clare felt that she could not do better than follow her cousin's advice ; there was clearly nothing to be done before daybreak, and she felt too sick and wearied to make needful preparations till she had rested. Nevertheless, she could not fall asleep ; or, if for a moment she dozed, she began to dream some frightful dream, and started up more widely awake than ever. And as the night went on, sleep receded farther and farther from her eyes ; she was thankful when the first faint streak of dawn penetrated the gloomy east, and the casement slowly began to grow "a glimmering square." She rose and dressed as quickly as she could in the dusky twilight, listening all the while for the sounds of Philip's footsteps in the room above. He was generally astir and downstairs long before the sun began to rise. And

in the meantime she wrote her telegram, and waited a little impatiently.

Presently she heard movements overhead ; and as he did not very quickly descend she went up to his door and knocked, crying out, "Please to make haste down, Philip ; I want to speak to you this instant."

Then she ran back to her own room, feeling almost ashamed of her impetuosity ; but she had not half packed her bag when she heard Philip open his door, and hurried out on to the landing. It did not take very long to explain the meaning of this sudden appeal, for she had rehearsed over and over again during the long night the story she had to tell, so as to put it into the most condensed form ; and Philip was by no means slow of apprehension, nor given to asking superfluous questions. He took in the situation almost immediately, and assured her that he would saddle his swiftest horse, and be at Allan Bridge quite as soon as would be of any avail. While he was away, she must finish her packing, have a good breakfast, and see Mr. and Mrs. Darlington, who, of course, must be prepared for her unexpected departure. When he returned, he would be ready to drive her to the station, quite in time to catch the first available train to London.

And long before he came back Clare had finished all she had to do, and was quite ready to set out on the first stage of her anticipated journey. "I am so sorry to go," she said, as they stood together on the platform during the few minutes that they had to spare. "I leave with more reluctance than I can describe ; still—I think it is the right thing to do."

"It is the *only* thing to do," he replied ; "though, of course, I feel very much disappointed at this enforced separation, following so closely upon yesterday's great happiness. Yet it would have been much worse if you had gone away without coming to an understanding. Now, at least, I can think of you as my own, and I can write to you and you to me ; and our thoughts to each other will bridge over the distance between us. But how long will you remain in Lowndes Square ?"

"That I cannot tell. You may be quite sure that I shall

not stay one day longer than I can help ; I shall be more out of my element than ever.. I will give you Tarleton's letter, it will explain things more fully than any words of mine. Lady Forest may not be so ill as she imagines—she was always extremely alarmed at the slightest indisposition. If she is really in such serious case as she believes, of course I may be delayed. To-morrow I will let you know the true state of things ; but you may rest assured that nothing short of the conviction that it is my *duty* will suffice to detain me beyond a few days, or perhaps a week."

And then the train appeared in sight, and the lovers, so recently affianced, were constrained to bid adieu. In a few minutes Clare was passing over familiar ground, and Weathersfield Station flashed upon her as the train began to quicken speed. It was a fast train, though scarcely an express ; nevertheless it seemed a very slow one to Clare, and the hours dragged wearily as the day passed on. The short November evening was closing in when they stopped to collect tickets at Finsbury Park, and the hazy atmosphere of London was falling heavily on all around. Something of the old depression and gloom fell likewise upon Clare's spirit, and she almost dreaded to reach the end of her journey.

But ere she had time to combat the nervous apprehension the lights of King's Cross were about her, and there was Tarleton on the platform, looking eagerly into the carriages as they glided by, and wearing the blankest expression of dismay when she failed to perceive the anxiously watched-for traveller.

Clare made her way through the crowd, the moment she could alight, to the spot where Tarleton waited.

" Oh, I am that thankful I could cry !" was the waiting woman's exclamation, when she had assured herself that Miss Darlington really stood before her. " Oh, why didn't you come quicker ? "

" I could not. I will tell you all about it presently ; your letter was delayed ; it did not come into my hands till last night at twelve o'clock. But I am not *too late* ? "

" No, thank God, you are in time. But she is dying as fast as she can die. She won't be with us more than a day

or two longer ; you've come to close her eyes, Miss Clare, and to be at her funeral."

"Are you sure that she is so alarmingly ill?" asked Clare, with much concern. "What do the doctors say is her malady? You know if she ails ever so little she is sure to despond. She thought that she was *in extremis* last winter, when she had that very mild influenza."

"Ah!" and Tarleton shook her head sorrowfully, "it is something worse than influenza, though I wouldn't say but that wasn't the first beginning of it. She went to a very grand picnic or garden party, or something of the sort, a little while after I left her service, and she contrived to get an awful cold, for the weather was that chilly and damp that it was madness to go picnicing and lawn-tennis-ing ; and the turf was enough to give her her death, it was that sodden with the long constant rains."

"I can quite believe that." They were in the carriage now, and Tarleton was full of her story. "And she took cold, you say?"

"Yes, Miss Clare ; and she had so many pleasant engagements she tells me, that she could not make up her mind to nurse it properly, as her custom has always been ; besides, she fancied a basin of white wine whey and a dose of spirits of nitre would be sure to throw it off, for it wasn't a *very* bad cold, she insists. And perhaps it wasn't, and she might have got the better of it if her maid as succeeded me hadn't gone and left her bedroom window half open one bitter night. My lady says she did it on purpose, out of pure spite, for they never took to one another. How that was, in course I can't say ; I only know that Mrs. Maples and she quarrelled, and my lady grew worse and worse, till in despair she sent for me."

"And she never mended?"

"Not for a day, scarcely for half a day. The doctors, one and all, tell the same tale ; she had dreadful bronchitis and congestion, and her lungs are almost gone. Her cough has been terrible, *racking*, enough to shake the life out of a much younger and stronger person than my lady. And now she's *sinking*—sinking fast, Miss Darlington."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

CLARE'S WELCOME.

"Ay, but to die, and go we know not where."

"O H, Clare, my dear, how glad I am to see you once again!"

The speaker, of course, was Lady Forest, bolstered up in bed, and trying in vain to extend her poor weak arms and enfold her visitor in a fond embrace. The slight exertion, however, was too much ; the sudden movement and the excitement brought on a violent and convulsive fit of coughing, which, for a while, no remedies could alleviate, and presently she lay back panting and perfectly exhausted, unable to say another word. Mrs. Ross, the trained nurse, who had been engaged to assist Tarleton, signed to Miss Darlington to go away. "She will be better presently, ma'am," she said ; "when these fits come on nothing can control them ; she will go on till she is quite exhausted, and the effort to speak is sure to renew the cough. If you will come again, in an hour's time, perhaps she will be able to say a word or two ; she's been asking all day what time it is, and wondering whether the carriage was quite ready to fetch you."

Clare found an elaborate dinner laid for her downstairs, and a solemn butler, whom she had never seen before, waited upon her with obsequious politeness ; displaying for her approval dish after dish, till she was thankful to make her escape, and request coffee in the drawing-room. She would fain have retired to her own chamber, which she knew was in readiness for her ; but she did not like either to intrude herself uninvited on the invalid, or to go to bed without being assured that she was not wanted. So she rested wearily on the sofa, listening to the rattle of carriages without, the noise of which contrasted painfully with the perfect stillness within ; and wishing that Tarleton would

pay her a visit and bring her the message that should dismiss her to her much-needed night's repose.

But it was almost ten o'clock when Tarleton at last appeared with "my lady's best love, and would Miss Darlington be good enough to come to her *now?*"

"Certainly," said Miss Darlington, doing her best to rouse herself; "but does the nurse permit visitors so late at night?"

"Oh, dear, yes, ma'am," was the reply; "we've all of us, doctors and all, to do whatever she bids, and humour all her fancies. Be sure you don't go to contradict her the least bit in the world, Miss Clare; she mustn't on no account be crossed, the principal physician says. So we do whatever she tells us at the first word, and we give her everything she asks for; she asked for roasted pork, only yesterday, and of course she had to have it."

"But is pork proper food for a person in her condition?" queried Clare. "Do not the doctors diet her?"

"They did at first, Miss Darlington; they began with it. The allopathetic doctor, he allowed stimulants; and the homopathic man, he advised cocoa and weak tea; and the water-doctor would hear of nothing *but* water, which naturally she is averse to, having scarcely tasted it in all her life. But now, the medical attendants all say, she may have just what she can take—nothing can make much difference now—she's too far gone; so we give her what she fancies, and she fancies *you* at this moment, Miss Clare, though not exactly for her supper. So we'd better be going, or somebody will be coming down to see why I don't bring you right up."

And, indeed, a bell sounded sharply from the upper landing, and Tarleton knew that for a summons. "Quick, quick, Miss Clare!" she exclaimed, starting towards the door; "the bell was pulled twice, and very quickly, and that means she's impatient. And if she is impatient she coughs; and if she coughs much it's bad for her, and very trying for us."

Clare followed Tarleton up-stairs, and took the seat which was placed ready for her at the bedside. There was an irritable signal given, and then both the attendants disappeared, going, however, only into the adjoining room. Clare

was more than ever shocked at the terrible alteration in her poor friend, who was worn to attenuation ; her eyes glistened with unnatural fever, and her breath came and went in spasmodic and audible gasps ; not a trace of the former brilliant woman of the world remained.

"Oh, Clare, Clare !" was her pitiful moan, as her young cousin seated herself, and took the burning, yet nerveless, hand in her own. "Clare, I am going *to die!*" and she looked pleadingly into the girl's face, as though mutely entreating her contradiction. But Clare *dared* not buoy her up with delusive hopes, for she saw on her haggard face the sure impress of swiftly-coming death. Just so had her father looked, as she kept that last sad watch beside him, only two or three days before he died. She could not give the response so evidently waited for. After a moment's silence, and a gentle caress, she said, simply, "Why did you not send for me sooner, cousin ?"

"I scarcely know. I felt so sure I should get better. I have never had much illness—I thought the doctors must be able to pull me through—somehow ; I have had all sorts, and spared no expense. Now I know it is all over—not one of them will give me any hope ; and the last one—he is more like a Methodist preacher than a doctor—as good as told me to prepare for the worst."

"May not the worst turn out to be the best ?"

"The best ! What *do* you mean, Clare ? I tell you I am dying—dying as rapidly as I can ; no medicine, no anything will save me. And, oh, Clare, what will become of me when this poor breath is quite gone? *where am I going?* I have loved this world—I have lived for it ; and now I am torn away from all its pleasures. I remember, about a year ago, you and I were talking about *Lent*, and 'the season,' and its many enjoyments ; and you *would* look serious, and think of '*Afterwards !*' Do you not recollect ?"

"Yes, and I said I would pluck the roses while they lasted. But even as I spoke, Cousin Forest, a voice that would not be silenced told me of a time that *must* come, sooner or later, and perhaps sooner than I expected—a time when I should care no longer for the world's 'roses,' because the world itself, and all it could offer, would be fading from

my sight. And what were all earth's splendours and gaieties, when they must pass away and leave me alone to die ? ”

“ *Alone !* Ah, that is so dreadful, so unspeakably horrible. I always hated to be alone ; even the companionship of that poor stupid Argles was far better than solitude. Clare, my dear, promise to stay with me till—till all is over. It will not be for very long.”

“ I will promise not to leave you so long as you need me. I came to be your nurse, and I will stay till you tell me to go, or till——”

“ Or till the end comes, you would say ? Thank you, dear, I do not deserve so much at your hands ; only—*only*, Clare, you can stand by me so long and no longer ; we shall part soon, very soon. I must go down into the grave *alone*.”

“ No, not alone, unless you will it so.”

“ Ah, you would proffer the consolations of religion. But I never was religious—I never could be. Religion is all very well while you have life and strength ; it fails you entirely when you feel the shadow of death creeping over you.”

“ A great deal that is called ‘ religion ’ does fail ; but, Cousin Forest, if I were you, I would not trouble myself about any sort of religion ; I would call upon Christ to save me, to take away the sting of death. *He* will give you *peace*.”

“ Ah, that doctor said something of the sort ; and the nurse he sent tried to read me a little book called ‘ Come to Jesus.’ But, Clare, I don’t know *how* to come to Him. Do *you* know ? ”

“ I believe *He* came to *me* ; I called to Him and He answered me. I wanted Him, and straightway I found Him. He gave me peace and rest ; and He has been with me ever since, and will be with me to the end.”

“ And you say this of your *own* experience ? You really know Christ ? You are not talking about what you have heard, but about what you really know and feel ? ”

“ About what I know, and what I feel in the very depths of my heart ; and I am *satisfied*. Cousin, I would not, for all this world could give me, loose my hold on Christ. All

my trust is in Him, and all my joy. I look to Him to be with me, and to guide and shelter me through life's journey ; and I know that when I, too, must descend into the dark valley, He will be with me, and lead me safe into the eternal light."

"But, Clare, you are young and strong ; you may have many years of happiness before you yet."

"I hope I have ; for the best and only happiness is to be found in God, and in His service. I never knew what happiness and contentment were till I loved Christ. Now, come what may, I am sure of peace—*the peace that passeth all understanding*. But I must leave you ; nurse says I have stayed quite long enough, and she thinks perhaps you will sleep a little if your cough will let you. I will be with you early in the morning. Good-night."

"Good-night. And, Clare, you will pray for me, will you not ? I have heard ministers say that God hears and answers prayer ; perhaps, if you asked Him, He might grant me a few more months of life. Do you think He would ? "

"I only know that He will surely grant the very best. Just put yourself in His hands, trust Him altogether, and see what He will do for you. Once more, good-night."

It was long before Clare, tired as she was, could compose herself to sleep. The last time she lay down in that bed—for her own old room had been prepared for her —she had not known what it was to *pray* at all. Now, the Lord had opened her lips, and she was constrained to show forth His praise. The last time she had laid her head on that downy pillow her soul was disquieted within her ; the cisterns of this world were failing her, one by one, and her thirst was unsatisfied. Now, God had led her, in His own way, to the Source of all good—all unfailing happiness. He had become, she scarcely knew how, all her salvation and all her desire ; and He would give her all things richly to enjoy, for time and for eternity. And, with prayer on her lips for herself, and for all she held dear—especially for her whose sands of life were so swiftly sinking—she fell asleep, and only awoke to find that it was full day, and Tarleton was standing at her bedside with her breakfast.

"For I thought you'd be glad of it when you awoke, Miss Darlington," she said. "You had a trying day yesterday, and wanted a good rest. I hope you have slept well in your old bed. My lady gave orders that we were to do our very best to make things seem just as they did use to be."

"Thank you," replied Clare, rousing herself up; "I have slept beautifully. I had no idea that it was so late; I quite intended being in my cousin's room by eight o'clock. How is she this morning?"

"Pretty much the same, I think. She fell asleep soon after you left her, and had several hours' very comfortable rest. I staid with her while the nurse got a little sleep. I kept watch till four, then I went to my bed, and had my turn. When I went back to my room, an hour ago, she seemed nice and quiet, though Mrs. Ross says she's been wide-awake ever since before five. I should say she was better, only the doctors told us she might rally a little the last day or two. I hope she'll go off easy, poor dear."

"I hope she will go to rest, trusting in Him in whom alone is confidence and peace," returned Clare, very solemnly.

"Miss Clare," asked Tarleton, with a little tremor in her voice, "do you *really* believe all you said to my poor lady last night? Do you feel it in your own heart? Is there no happiness except what God gives?"

"Be sure, Tarleton, there is no such thing as peace or happiness out of God's love and service. Out of Him we are not, and cannot be *satisfied*; we are tossed about by all sorts of disappointments, and vexations, and uncertainties; we look for rest and find only weariness. In Him all is well with us; we are on the same sure Foundation; nothing can really harm us; and we know that *He* is our God and Father, and that He will be our Guide for ever, even unto death."

"You didn't use to talk in this way, Miss Clare. Nobody seemed to find more to enjoy in life than you did till that tiresome old Dook came. For my part, I don't hold with giving up the world."

"Nor I either, Tarleton. It is God's world, and *He* has

put me in it to enjoy it. One may live to God, and be happy in Him, without giving up any innocent pleasures. God does not mean His children to go through life with gloomy faces, and heads turned away from lawful enjoyments."

"I suppose, Miss Clare, the question is, What enjoyments are lawful, and what are not?"

"Everything is lawful, I imagine, that does not separate our souls from God. Only sinful creatures will abuse what a heavenly Father has given for their use. But now I have finished my breakfast, and we must talk no longer; you must leave me to dress."

"Shall I not come presently, when you have taken your bath, and help you, Miss Clare?"

"No, thank you; I am quite used to wait upon myself now; indeed, I prefer to be independent. Tell Lady Forest I will be with her as soon as possible."

Clare found her cousin certainly rested, and able to breathe more freely. The nurse said she had had a very tolerable night—*considering!*—and was wonderfully free from pain; she had quite enjoyed her breakfast, too; she only hoped my lady would not talk too much.

"The pain is very much relieved," said Lady Forest, when she and Clare were left again alone together. "It does not hurt me at all to breathe; only, something seems gone here," and she laid her hand upon her chest. "If I can eat I fancy I shall get better; they have been keeping me quite too low, I am sure; I want more nourishment and stimulant; they allowed me *none* till a day or two ago, and then the doctor ordered wine. And I may have any little thing I fancy; I think I should like a slice of pheasant for my dinner, and a glass of good sound Madeira. There is plenty in the cellar—it has a *green* seal. Weller knew all about it, but this man is quite a stranger, and I have not trusted him with the key of the wine-cellar. I will give it to you, my dear; I should like you to constitute yourself mistress till I am about again."

She certainly believed that now she was going to get better, she seemed so free from pain; and though her voice was very low and weak, her breathing was not

unnatural. Clare found it very difficult to return to the conversation of the preceding evening ; her cousin was not disposed to resume the subject which, a few hours before, had occupied all her thoughts. She wanted Clare to tell her all she had been doing since she left Lowndes Square in April, and she listened with deep interest to the account of the flood, and all the dangers she and the rest of the family had had to encounter.

"How dreadful!" she said, when the narrator paused. "Clare, you must never go back to such a dangerous place. You must stay and live with me, and we will be as happy as we were in the days before that tiresome Duke came in our way. I promise never to mention his name again, if you will consent to let all things be as they used to be before we went to Chilling Towers. Perhaps I had better tell you at once that there is a rumour of his impending marriage with a celebrated actress."

"The 'celebrated actress' will probably suit him far better than I ; and, as you know, he would not suit me at all. Besides, I, too, am engaged to be married."

"You are going to be married? Oh, Clare, you are going to marry one of those louts of the Mill—one of your clodhopping cousins. I knew you would, sooner or later."

"My cousins are not louts, Cousin Forest; and a young woman might do far worse for herself than link her fate with either Ralph or Dick, whom I greatly esteem, and for whom I have a sincere affection. But I am not thinking of marrying a Darlington. I could not care, *in that way*, for one so close to me as a cousin. Dick and Ralph are as much my brothers as Edith and Theresa are my sisters."

"Who is it, then? Any one I ever heard of?"

"Have you forgotten Philip Warner, whom you so much approved of once upon a time?"

"That young fellow who escorted you to Silverbeach when I was staying there. Of course I have not forgotten him. He was strikingly handsome, and so aristocratic-looking, I thought he must be *somebody*. But, really, who is he? And has he any property?"

"He is what you would call 'nobody in particular,' Cousin Forest. His father was a man of some means, I

suppose, for he left a considerable fortune to his son ; he was related, though not very nearly, to Cousin Margery. Philip was educated well and liberally ; he was a good deal abroad, though his home has been with his adopted mother from his infancy, and he loves her as a son."

"Who is she?"

"She is my dear cousin Margery, and no other. Philip has never known any other parent ; his father died, I believe, somewhere in America."

"And the mother—Mrs. Warner?"

"She died, too, I suppose ; but when or where, I do not know. Philip himself could not tell me ; he said he had never heard his father mention her. But I have heard—I hardly like to say it—that she left her husband and her infant ; that she disgraced the good name of Warner. It was Edith who told me, and she had it from her own mother, who really is uncertain whether this unhappy person is alive or dead. Her history is so sad a one, that Cousin Margery has never spoken of it but that once ; she left Philip's father, she says, within two years of her marriage, and was lost even to her own relations, who were respectable though needy people. Philip quite believes she is dead ; but Cousin Margery is by no means certain of it."

"Not a very desirable connection, I should say. Really, Clare, though I promised not to tease you, I cannot help feeling a little disappointed. You might have done so very much better."

"Do you think so, Cousin Forest ? Well, I think not ; I never could have married any other man, for I could never have loved any other. I told you long ago that I had no sort of entanglement—no attachment, even—to any one in the world. I thought I was quite free, and what is called 'heart-whole' ; but I deceived myself. All the while I did care for Philip Warner ; had the Duke been a far better and more satisfactory man than he was, I am pretty sure I should not have listened to *him*—*because*, all the while though unconsciously, another had the place he wanted. I did not understand myself ; I did not know what Philip was to me till one day, not very long ago, when I thought I had, by my own foolishness, lost him for ever."

"It is really settled, then, that you are to marry him?"

"Yes, we are formally engaged; it is understood, on all hands, that I am Philip's betrothed."

"And you think you love him?"

"I am sure I love him, or he would have no more chance with me than the Duke had."

"Why, child, you talk as if dukes and farmers were on an equality!"

"In this case I am very happy to know that the farmer is infinitely the superior. I shall never have to blush for my husband's misconduct; I shall never have to bear the shame and burden of my husband's sin."

"And, pray, when is he to be your husband?"

"I have not the least idea. He, too, lost a good deal of money through the inundation; besides which he has, with my full consent and approval, made common cause with Cousin Robert, who, as I told you, is all but ruined. We are quite content to wait till worldly circumstances shall justify our union. If God shall see fit to send us renewed prosperity—if He blesses the fruits of our industry—the marriage will certainly not be unnecessarily delayed."

"Clare, I said I would not plague you; but, really, you provoke me almost past endurance. Do you know that you are simply throwing yourself away? *You*—with undeniable beauty, your gifts, and your good birth—to be a common *farmer's wife*!"

"If he were a *common* farmer, I think I should hesitate. In my opinion he is a decidedly uncommon person—farmer, or miller, or whatever we may choose to call him. He is an educated gentleman—you saw that for yourself—and I know that he is a decided Christian."

"And you are sure you will not repent? Pause and reflect, I beseech you."

"I am as sure of myself as I can be. I think I have made up my mind irrevocably."

"Very well. A wilful woman must have her way, I suppose. I might have given you a handsome *dot* if you were not going to make such a decided *mésalliance*. Give me some of that port-wine jelly. I feel dreadfully low and exhausted."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE NIGHT WATCH.

“In life, in death, oh, Lord, abide with me !”

C~~L~~A~~R~~E was just folding up her letter to Philip when she became aware that Dr. Mowbray, for whose visit she had been eagerly watching, was coming from the patient’s bedroom. She hastened on to the landing so as to intercept his further descent, requesting him, if he were not too much pressed for time, to speak a few words with her before he left the house.

“You are Miss Darlington ?” he inquired, as he prepared to assent to her request,—“Lady Forest’s niece, I believe ; the young lady for whose arrival she was so extremely anxious ?”

“Yes, I am Clare Darlington, and Lady Forest is my cousin, not my aunt. I should feel so very much obliged to you if you would tell me plainly what you think of her condition. Tell me, if you please, without any circumlocution, is her recovery hopeless ?”

“Quite so ; there is not the shadow of a chance for her. How long she may last I cannot exactly say—it is a mere question of time. Her complaint to-day has developed an entirely new phase which seems to her most favourable, though, in reality, it is rather the reverse. She is decidedly weaker than when I saw her yesterday, and she is comparatively free from pain. I think, as far as I can judge, she will suffer very little more—her last hours will probably be peaceful.”

“Then am I to understand that she is absolutely past aid ?—is there no hope remaining for her ?”

“None, I fear ; indeed, perhaps I ought to say I am positive. If she had youth on her side I should be less sure—if she were twenty years younger than she is she might even yet be snatched from speedy death—because she is not really deficient in stamina, and one is always safe in determining

that while there is life there is hope. But she owns to being over fifty years of age."

"She is in her fifty-fifth year, I am tolerably certain she is not any younger ; but, Dr. Mowbray, what is killing her ?"

"Would you think me too brutal if I were to say that it is her own folly and perversity ? I really believe some of you fashionable ladies are all but insane ; your folly, in fact, is worse than lunacy—it is wickedness !"

"Pray, do not class me with fashionable ladies. Once I was dissipated enough, I grant, but now, when I am at home, I live quietly in the country. And Tarleton tells me that my cousin neglected herself most imprudently."

"So far as mortals can control their own fate she might have controlled hers ; she need not now be a dying woman ; she seems to have imagined herself invulnerable. God would probably have granted her many more years of life ; there was no reason, so far as I can see, why she should not have reached the threescore and ten which is, on the average, the limit of human life. She provoked disease ; she set at defiance all the common laws of nature and of health."

"What did she do ?"

"She went to a garden-party at my Lady Blatter's when she had a cold upon her, and when no one, in their sober senses, ought to have dreamed of garden-parties. This has not been a summer for *al fresco* entertainments, and those who have given them deserve to be tried for manslaughter. It had rained for more than a week before Lady Blatter's affair ; the lawns were sodden, the walks and terraces were moss-grown, the air was humidity itself. This might not have mattered so much, perhaps, had people had the sense to dress suitably, and wear good stout boots, instead of frivolous, little, high-heeled, promenade shoes ; and if those who caught cold through their imprudence had staid at home and nursed themselves, instead of rushing into fresh follies. A few days' confinement to the house, and a basin of honest gruel, might have checked the mischief."

"But, surely, Lady Forest *did* nurse her cold ?"

"She did, when it was too late. The day after the garden-party she was hoarse and feverish, yet she could not make

up her mind to stay at home for the evening, for she was engaged to appear at a ball, and she was to wear a most brilliant and *recherché* costume. She could not forego the pleasure, she said—her cold was not so very bad ; she could go to bed for a week afterwards ; she had not worn her finest jewels for months, and her dress was incomparable. So she took a ‘pick-me-up’—if you know what such things are, Miss Darlington—and she went to her ball. It was a very grand affair, I believe ; her bodice was what you call ‘*cut square*,’ and her arms, and chest, and neck were injuriously exposed. She came home at four o’clock in the morning so ill that her maid needed help in getting her to bed, and next day she was in a terrible plight. She got over the worst, though, when another, and yet another irresistible temptation came in her way, in the shape of a most delightful invitation, which ‘she could not be expected to refuse’—those were her own words. The medical man then attending her sternly forbade her to change her woollen dressing-gown for a light evening-robe, warning her that she did it at the peril of her life. She refused, of course, to listen to the voice of reason ; she felt so very much—so wonderfully better—a little change always did her so much good ; it was better than a thousand prescriptions. Really, she thought it was her *duty* to rouse herself, and try to throw off her nervous depression. And she did rouse herself, and for a few hours exulted in the improvement that was taking place within. Then she suddenly became very ill. Bronchitis and congestion supervened, the malady fastened on her lungs, and when, at last, she consented to put herself under proper treatment, it was *too late*—she was too far gone.”

“I heard something about her bedroom window being left open all night. That must have aggravated the mischief greatly.”

“Doubtless it did her no good ; but the curtains being closely drawn, and a good fire burning, I should fancy it could scarcely have had fatal consequences. The disease had attained a certain mastery over her even before she took to her bed, and she persisted in changing her doctors so continually, and varying her treatment so capriciously, that she gave herself scarcely any chance ; and a more

irrational, unmanageable patient, I am constrained to say, I never attended. Did Lady Forest speak to you of her danger, Miss Darlington?"

"She did, last night, on my first arrival. She said—oh, so pitifully—that she was dying. But this morning she feels better, and she is sanguinely looking forward to speedy recovery."

"I know, poor lady! She laughed and said she should cheat all the doctors yet. She was going to get well again, if it were only to cheat so many professional croakers. I looked very grave, and replied that I was afraid to encourage her buoyant hopes, for on examination in the usual way I could not detect any symptoms of actual improvement. Miss Darlington, I fear God; and I dare not take upon myself the awful responsibility of deluding, by false hopes, one who is so very near eternity. A few more hours—two or three days at the most—and she will stand, where we all must stand some day before the judgment seat of Christ. I beseech you not to endeavour to deceive her with the anticipation of probable recovery. Seek rather to point her to the Sacrifice for sin, and to the rest that remaineth. If you are a Christian woman you will care for her departing soul, for she shrinks, with dread unspeakable, from the shadow of the grave."

"I am striving to be a Christian, Dr. Mowbray. It is not so long since I dreaded death myself as the King of Terrors. Now, thank God, I have my rest in Him; He has granted me the blessed sense of pardon and peace, and the sting of death is taken away. Even now the Lord may speak to her troubled spirit, and bid her look to Him, and fear no more."

"God grant it may be so, for nothing is impossible with Him. May I count upon you, too, to act and speak with all possible discretion? A sudden shock *might* be instantly fatal. A little impetuosity, a few unguarded expressions, and you might defeat your own most cherished aspiration; the feeble flame of life that has flickered in the socket to-day may sink without warning into total darkness."

"I will be as judicious as I know how to be, I promise you; and may God help me to be her comforter. May He

teach me what to say, and how to say it. Thank you very much for all you have said to me."

And then, having bidden "good-bye" to Dr. Mowbray, Clare added a few lines to the letter she had already penned, explaining more fully the real state of things in Lowndes Square, and begging Philip not to look for her till all was over, since she had promised the dying woman that she would not leave her as long as she bade her remain. And then having taken her letter to the post herself, by way of a constitutional, she went up to Lady Forest's room to spend the next few hours.

She found the invalid undergoing the operation of making a sort of toilet, the nurse all the while protesting against the unnecessary exertion. Tarleton had just adjusted a costly embroidered and lace-trimmed *peignoir* on her shoulders, and was trying on a very ornamental nightcap, lavishly decorated with soft pink-satin ribbons. Her thin bands of limp, scanty hair were tastefully disposed, and kept in place by means of plenty of "*Cosmetique Fixateur*." Lastly, a very delicate *soupçon* of rouge was most judiciously applied, and the waiting woman's task was done. Clare could have wept as she beheld the ghastly travesty, and Mrs. Ross's eyes were full of tears. Even Tarleton shook her head as she turned away.

Not a word was spoken till Lady Forest herself welcomed her guest, and in a feeble, but still audible voice, exclaimed, "Now this is something like, Clare; your coming has certainly done me all the good in the world; I am feeling quite myself to-day. If I go on at this rate I shall be well able to sit up a little to-morrow; perhaps this evening, while my bed is being arranged. And next week, I shall get into the drawing-room and see a few friends, I hope; I never could rally as long as I was kept shut up in my own chamber. You must go to Madame Marie, Clare—at latest to-morrow—and consult her as to a really becoming invalid-costume; I want her to design something especially for *my* wearing. I should like something entirely novel and perfectly unique. I fancy a pale pink cashmere, trimmed with swansdown, made rather full, and disposed in graceful folds, would be charming; what do you say, my dear?"

"I scarcely know what to say, cousin ; I have been talking with Dr. Mowbray, and he thinks you are over-estimating your powers. I am sure he will never consent to your receiving callers next week ; he insists on your being kept as quiet as possible, and he asked me why we had not thought of laying down another load of tan before the house, that the noise of the passing carriages might not disturb you."

"Such utter nonsense ! It has quite refreshed me this afternoon to hear the rattle of the wheels upon the stones. Why, Clare, *tan* on the roadway always implies extreme sickness, and I was very glad of it a little while ago, when my poor nerves were so shattered—even the distant roar in the Park was rather too much for me yesterday, and I had to send across to Mrs. Albert MacWhirter, and implore her to keep her noisy birds out of the verandah. If you put down a fresh supply, the neighbours will think I am *dying* ! Dr. Mowbray is a dreadful wet blanket ; I shall get a less depressing doctor in a day or two—only, I think one scarcely gives oneself fair chances making so *many* changes ; so perhaps I had better put up with his long face and discouraging, unsympathising words. You must not listen to him, Clare ; Mrs. Ross, there, makes quite a Pope of him. It is supremely ridiculous."

"I think if one sends for a physician, one ought to place full confidence in him, and Dr. Mowbray has the reputation of being a most skilful and trustworthy doctor."

"He is very attentive, I own, and nurse insists upon it that he is unequalled at making a *diagnosis*. A diagnosis, indeed—as if that mattered ! I don't want to be told precisely what is the matter with me ; I want to be cured. Let him get me out in the Park again, and I will believe in his wonderful ability. Give me some of that grape jelly, Clare. No, on second thoughts, I'll have the port-wine jelly—that's so much more supporting, and I'm rather faint after the fatigue of changing my night-dress. Get up another bottle of *Beaune*, too ; I want *stimulant*. I wonder if I might venture on just one glass of my favourite Château Yquem—what say you, nurse ? "

"I think you might have it, perhaps, my lady, but I should

most strongly advise you to stick to the *Beaune*, which the doctor has expressly ordered, till we know whether another sort of wine is desirable."

"I tell you I must have the Château Yquem—I fancy it ; and Dr. Mowbray said I was to have whatever I fancied. No, I cannot touch the *Beaune* now ; it is too thin, and turning sour."

So the delicate and expensive Sauterne was produced, and Lady Forest professed to enjoy it very much, though after a sip or two she desired her attendants to mingle it with water. The undiluted wine took away her breath, she said, and she had such a singular sensation in her throat ; it was not very easy to swallow. And having refreshed herself with a very little wine, and trifled with a teaspoonful of jelly, she thought she must go to sleep, she was excessively tired and drowsy—it was not very lively work lying in bed day after day, whatever that lugubrious Dr. Mowbray might think of it. And for about half-an-hour she slept profoundly, and then started up in affright, crying out that she had had a dreadful dream ; she thought she was going to interview a new and most celebrated physician, who had been sent to her by her dead husband, and when he came to the bedside it was Sir Raymond himself. And as he put out his skinny hand he turned into a *skeleton*, in grave-clothes, and told her she had not many hours to live.

It was long before they could soothe her ; and though, after a while, she grew rather more composed, the dream had evidently made a strong impression upon her, more than she cared to acknowledge. She talked no more about Madame Marie, and she bade Tarleton take the Château Yquem away, for she was sure it had disagreed with her ; it had given her the *nightmare*, and consequent palpitations, besides waking her out of a most delightful slumber. She was evidently depressed ; and she had a good deal to say about the deceased Sir Raymond, and his last illness, and how his dying words were—"Lord, remember me !" Clare tried to turn her thoughts to the story of the penitent thief on the cross ; and she repeated aloud the well-known hymn, so frequently sung at our Communion services, beginning at that verse which commences—"When to the Cross I turn

my eyes." When she came to the last lines she was surprised to find that Lady Forest seemed to recognise them ; and still more, that she tried to repeat them after her, and murmured to herself, again and again,

" And when these failing lips grow dumb,
And mind and memory flee."

After that she lay very still, sometimes, Clare fancied, rambling a little, and talking in unconnected snatches about Sir Raymond—of whom she, as a rule, seldom made much mention. And so the hours went, the daylight waned, and the wild wintry evening closed in. At eight o'clock Lady Forest asked for some tea, a little of which she drank, though she would not touch the slice of toast that accompanied it—she could not swallow any solid food it was apparent. Then she told Tarleton—whom, however, she took for Nurse Ross—to take off her elegant wrap, and put on a plain flannel jacket instead. Tarleton also, without being told, removed her stylish cap, and for very shame, on the pretence of applying a little *eau-de-cologne* and water, wiped away the ghastly pink spot from the hollow cheeks. And then, and not till then, they all saw that the ashen hue of death was fast gathering over her features. The shade that never falls but once on mortal lineaments was falling now on hers. The end was near at hand.

It was very late, approaching midnight, when Dr. Mowbray paid his final visit. No one had expected him, but he had been called out on an urgent case in the immediate neighbourhood, and passing the house, and seeing the lights in the windows, he had chosen to look in. He could do nothing, suggest nothing ; his patient was past all earthly aid, and she did not appear to notice his presence at all. She gave no greeting, either when he came or when he went. She seemed unconscious as solemnly he commended her to God, and bade her a long farewell. The closed eyes would certainly never welcome the morrow's dawn ; the poor worldly heart would have ceased to beat.

Then they were alone again with the dying woman, and Clare and Mrs. Ross, and even Tarleton, knelt in prayer for her who had prayed so little for herself. The night wore

on, the noises of the day died away. Clare Darlington to her dying hour will never forget that solemn watch beside her cousin's deathbed.

And slowly and sadly passed the dreary and solemn vigil kept by those three almost silent women. If they spoke, it was with bated breath, and almost in whispers ; and they moved softly about the room, and as noiselessly as possible renewed the fire, as if they feared to disturb her who would never, in this world, suffer disturbance any more. And so the time passed on, and the morning was at hand.

The clocks had struck five, and all the world still lay in the grey silence of repose. Tarleton had fallen asleep on the chair where she had passed the night ; and Mrs. Ross had retired to the adjoining dressing-room, leaving, however, the door of communication half open, that she might be ready to return to her post at a moment's notice. Clare still kept her place at the head of the bed, listening to the faint breathings of the sufferer, and now and then moistening her clammy lips with a little wine and water ; and blending with her almost ceaseless prayer for the departing was one fervent petition for herself, "Oh, Lord, in life as in death, let me be Thine !"

What were they doing "at home," she vaguely wondered. Were they all sleeping peacefully beneath that humble but thrice-blessed roof ? And did they, ere they slept, remember their far-away kinswoman, whose spirit was even now hovering on the boundaries of time ? And was the Allan Water still murmuring through the silence of the night ? And was the roar of the Mill Pool still sounding, as of yore, over the silent woods and pastures ? She felt so very far away from those she loved so well. God bless them all, and keep them safely under the shadow of His wings. And there came to her desponding thoughts two lines she and her cousins had often joined in singing at the evening hour of family worship—

"Abide with me, when night is nigh,
For without Thee I dare not die."

Just then there was a slight rustle at her side, and the pale figure, so long motionless, seemed to try to turn towards

her. “Clare!” she heard, “dear Clare, say ‘*Remember me!*’”

But before the words could pass her trembling lips there was a little faint gasp or two, a low, long-drawn sigh, a quivering of the eyelids, and all that was mortal of Clare, Lady Forest, had passed into the mysterious, unseen world on the other side of the river of death.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

“Why should we faint and fear to live alone,
Since all alone, so Heaven has willed, we die?”

ABOUT four o'clock in the afternoon Clare was informed that a gentleman was wishing to see her in the drawing-room ; he had, in fact, arrived in answer to her own summons, for she had, some hours earlier, despatched a brief note by a trusty messenger to this Mr. Bellingham, who was, as she very well knew, her deceased cousin's lawyer and man of business. He had been Sir Raymond's solicitor, too, and the widow's affairs had been entirely in his hands. Clare was very much puzzled at first to decide what to do, for poor Lady Forest had left no instructions of any sort behind her, and she knew very well that steps would have to be taken without delay, while the servants naturally looked to her for orders.

She went down immediately, for she was rather anxiously expecting his appearance. It was a dark and rainy day, and the lowered blinds and tightly-closed shutters did not at all tend to improve the cheerless aspect of the house. She found Mr. Bellingham sitting by the fire, looking quite as serious as the occasion demanded ; the gas was already lighted, and, notwithstanding the lawyer's lugubrious coun-

tenance, he was evidently quite prepared to proceed at once to business.

"So my poor friend and client has really departed this life?" said Mr. Bellingham, as a preliminary remark, when he had exchanged the orthodox ceremonious greetings. He was an elderly little man, with a rather wrinkled and shrivelled face, and his manner was strictly professional and reserved; nevertheless, Clare knew him to be a man of strict integrity and unblemished honour, and he was as much in Lady Forest's confidence as any one well could be; for she was by no means in the habit of imparting her views and intentions freely to any living creature, preferring, as she often said, to keep her own secrets, and "trust nobody any farther than she could see them." Besides, her fickle and capricious disposition involved so many changes, that she did not know her own mind for any length of time together.

"I have given a few necessary orders," said Clare, presently; "but I thought it only right to send for you at once; and I thank you very much for responding so promptly to my call. The first thing to be thought of is, of course, the *funeral*."

"Exactly so. But did the deceased lady leave no instructions on this particular point?"

"None that I know of. Would it be right and prudent, do you think, to look through her private davenport? We might find some memoranda conveying her last wishes."

"It is our only proper course of action. She left no precise directions with *me*, though I do remember that she expressed more than once her intention of being buried with her late husband at Kensal Green. There is room for her at his side in the vault she purchased, of course; and I should advise that the interment take place there, unless, indeed, we find some paper requesting that her remains be carried to the family place of burial, which is, you know, at Chilling. By the way, Miss Darlington, have you apprised Sir Francis Darlington of the mournful event? The sad news ought to be immediately communicated to the *head* of the family."

"I have failed in my duty there, for it never occu-

me to write to Sir Francis, and he is certainly one of Lady Forest's nearest-of-kin, and will expect to attend her funeral."

"Never mind ; I will see to that ; I will telegraph as I go home to dinner. If you have no objection, Miss Darlington, we will immediately examine the davenport. Some one *may* be named as her executor, for I must own I have not the least idea to whom I ought to make reference. The will, of course, will be forthcoming on the day of the obsequies."

"There is a *will*, then?"

"There are at least *a dozen*. My respected client was rather given to the weakness of executing testamentary documents. I could not undertake to say how many I have drawn up and destroyed by her command. But her 'last will and testament' was duly signed and sealed, and witnessed no later than a week ago. It is scarcely probable that any instrument exists revoking *that* disposition of her effects ; whatever it may be, we shall find this document in the private drawer of her own *bureau* ; I placed it there with my own hands. And there it must remain till we return from laying her in the grave, when it must be read aloud in the presence of yourself, and any other relative who may see fit to attend the ceremony ; also before the servants, several of whom, I have reason to believe, are legatees. Of course it will be requisite to make the usual examination, and then put seals on everything : the keys to be delivered up to the heir-at-law as soon as we have ascertained *who* he or she may be. Now, let us proceed to business."

There was, however, no enlightening document in the private davenport, which Lady Forest always specified as her *secretaire* ; there was not a line referring in any way to her possible demise. There lay the MS. of the first volume of the famous uncompleted novel ; there were many sheets of rough copy, chiefly in the illegible handwriting of Miss Argles ; and there was a good deal of memoranda of a literary nature, and that was all. So that the search was in vain ; and Tarleton, on being summoned, as the person most likely to be in the confidence of the deceased, gave it as

her opinion, "that my lady wasn't at all likely to think about being buried anywhere, since she hated—as Miss Clare very well knew—to consider her latter end, though making a will was a diversion to which she was rather partial; and if one old will was burned, there were at least twenty—all of them being consumed before my lady's face, so that there should be no confusion *in case* she did not recover. The one will which had escaped destruction was, as Mr. Bellingham knew, attested by one of his own clerks and Dr. Mowbray, and my lady had never touched pen and ink since the day of signature."

Clare had written again to Philip, and was further considering whether she might not be justified in entreating one of her cousins to join her in Lowndes Square for the short period which must perforce elapse before she could return to Duston; the great darkened house was very dreary, and poor Clare felt unusually sad and depressed; when, having closed her desk, she sat down beside the solitary fireside in the deserted boudoir, and thought mournfully of the events of the last few hours, and of the silent Presence in the room above. She was conscious of being rather nervous, too, and she was wearied and overwrought. How she envied the servants who were comfortably taking their tea together below-stairs. She was divided in her own mind between going very early to bed, or summoning Mrs. Ross to sit with her during part of the evening. She had just resolved upon the latter alternative, when she heard a carriage stop at the door, and she was preparing herself to receive Dr. Mowbray, or some messenger from Mr. Bellingham, when the staid butler walked into the room and solemnly inquired if Miss Darlington felt herself equal to receiving a visitor?

"That depends upon who it is," replied Clare, who did *not* feel equal to maintaining a conversation with Miss Honeybun, or Lady Blatter, or any other of her departed cousin's intimate and dear acquaintances. "What is the visitor's name?"

"The lady said she had forgotten her card-case, madam; but she was sure you would remember, and might like to see her. She said Dr. Mowbray had informed her of your

bereavement, and begged her to call on you. She gave her name as *Miss Vanderquist*."

"Most certainly I will see her ; she is an old friend—show her up, Davies. Where is she ?"

"In the morning-room, madam. She would not intrude upon you unannounced."

"Show her up immediately, if you please ; she is the very person I should wish to see."

And in another minute Miss Vanderquist was in the room ; the same bright yet quaint little creature as ever, not in the least altered, Clare thought, since they parted, early in the year, at Chilling Towers.

"And so we meet at last," said Dorothea, standing on tiptoes to kiss her tall and stately friend ; "I really thought from your last letter there was very little prospect of seeing you again in town, and I was thinking of writing to you at Duston to ask if you could spare me a week or two at Christmas, when to-day, quite accidentally, as it seemed, I came across my old friend Dr. Mowbray ; and, somehow—I am sure I do not know *how*—your name was introduced, and I said we were intimate ; and he told me what had happened here, and finished up by saying—'she ought not to be left alone with servants in that sad house of death ; *you* are the very person to go to her, Miss Vanderquist.' And here I am."

"And you are as welcome as flowers in May ! I suppose my nerves have been rather over-strained, for I am feeling startlish and extremely low-spirited. I really believe, Dorothea, you are sent to be my deliverer in the hour of trial. I am almost as silly and tremulous to-night as I was at Chilling Towers, under the apprehension of a visit from 'Lady Betty.' I am more than glad to welcome you."

"Then, my dear, I am quite at your service ; I can stay with you, if my company would be agreeable. I am a free and independent agent, you know—at least I am just now—for I am quietly at home in my own house on the other side of the park, and my companion, Mrs. Fordingbridge, has her two nieces with her, at present, so she will not be alone. My maid is at the door still ; I came in a cab, you know. Now, if you do not object, I will send her back to

Inverness Gardens for all that I may require for a day or two, and you and I can talk ourselves to sleep, as we did almost a year ago. My old maid, Janet, is still with me. Shall I do as I propose?"

" You could not do me a greater kindness, Dolly. Of course there is nothing here to be afraid of, and I have no actual dread of the poor, white, cold thing that was my Cousin Forest this time yesterday. But I am rather an over-excitable subject, I fancy, and my nerves altogether have been shaken. The maids, too, are timid, and will not go on to the upper landing alone ; Tarleton says she could not go into *the* room for any money. And, you know, silly fancies are infectious, and I start if a coal falls out of the fire, or if there is any sound above, or if there is a sudden knock at the door. It will be such a comfort to have you if you are quite sure you are not wanted elsewhere."

" I am entirely off duty at present, and, as I tell you, my *dame de compagnie* will not be left to solitude. Dr. Mowbray was certain I should not be *de trop*, and I was conceited enough to think you would like *me* better than a great many people."

" Better than most. For one thing, you know my little weaknesses ; I feel quite brave and strong again now you have taken me under your protection."

" Very well. Then I will run down at once and despatch Janet on her errand. Shall she return home after bringing my dressing-bag, or shall she remain here ?"

" That shall be exactly as pleases yourself. Tarleton will be delighted to accommodate her, I am sure. She and Janet are old acquaintances, you know, and the servants now in the house are new to the place, and no friends of hers. Pray let Janet remain."

And so it was settled. Janet soon drove off, and presently returned with all her mistress's present requirements ; and Tarleton, who came up to ask what the ladies would like for supper—for Miss Darlington had taken no dinner to speak of—expressed her great satisfaction at the expected advent of her old associate. " For we can't be too many, I think, Miss Vanderquist. If it wasn't such a melancholy occasion, I should say 'the more the merrier.' And I'm downright

glad you are come, on Miss Clare's account, ma'am. First of all, she had a very trying journey ; and then she had to go through most painful experiences—and a death in a house *does* shake one's nerves—and neither Miss Clare, nor the nurse, nor me, got a wink of sleep till after breakfast this morning. She did want somebody, and you are the very person, of all others, to bear her company. Miss Vanderquist, you are '*a friend in need*,' and that's a '*friend indeed*,' so the saying goes."

So it came to pass that Clare actually relished her supper, for she had by no means enjoyed her solitary meals in the spacious, silent dining-room ; nor yet the slight refreshment she had from time to time forced herself to take in the sick chamber ; and once more the two friends shared the same bed, and Clare, thoroughly worn out, slept profoundly at Dorothea's side. In the morning arrived a communication from Sir Francis, promising to come up to town in time for the funeral, as he much wished to pay the last respects to his cousin ; Lady Rosamund would not be able to accompany him. And there was a letter from Philip, too, which I need not say greatly conduced to raise Clare's flagging spirits, and by a later post there was one from Edith ; and meanwhile the usual mournful preparations went on, and there were muffled footsteps on the stairs ; and a strange personage in black, of semi-genteel appearance, arrived as if by stealth, and was privately interviewed by Mr. Bellingham.

Of course, the fact of Clare's engagement was news to Miss Vanderquist, for there had been no correspondence between the friends for nearly three months. And she could only offer her sincere congratulations ; for if Philip was indeed the man he appeared to be, Clare had drawn a prize in the lottery of marriage. And it was a comfort to her to know that this beautiful and sensitive girl would, in due time, be blessed with a lawful protector, and a bright home of her own.

"For, however humble our home may be," continued Clare, "I think it will be a happy one. We shall be contented without luxuries ; and, as I told you, we are quite willing to wait till the family affairs are more prosperous.

We are entirely of one mind as regards our obligations to Cousin Robert and Cousin Margery ; they have been father and mother to him, and almost as much to me, for they cordially gave me a home when I really needed one, and they have made me one of themselves from the very beginning, thankless and arrogant as I was at the first."

"And you have your own little fortune, to say nothing of your delightful gift of authorship."

"I hope to increase the profits of my literary work very soon. I should like to be able, ere long, to put something handsome into Cousin Robert's hands. I am growing quite mercenary, I assure you ; as for my own income, you know what it is ?—barely enough to keep me in frocks, and bonnets, and shoe-leather."

"But surely you will inherit *some* of Lady Forest's large fortune ?"

"I do not expect any such luck. She told me long ago that I should be her sole heiress *if* I married the Duke of Acresworth ! I quite understood that it was not to Clare Darlington, but to the Duchess elect, that she desired to bequeath her wealth ; and when I absolutely refused to make the match she had taken such trouble to arrange, she told me plainly that I should never handle a sixpence of hers ; henceforth I was no more to her than the beggar in the street, and any claim I might fancy I possessed, as one of her nearest-of-kin, was forfeited, and for ever. You know she forbade me the house ; she civilly turned me out of doors, and for the moment I was stunned, for I had nowhere to go to but to my cousins at the Mill. If they had been hard-hearted I really do not know what would have become of me ; for I think nothing short of actual destitution would have driven me to seek a refuge in Kilmarnock Gardens."

"Why did you not write to me, Clare ?"

"Dolly, I could not write. I was worried and harassed till my life was almost insupportable. You cannot think how unhappy I was all last spring ; once or twice I almost resolved to give up the contest, and do as I was bid. I wondered afterwards, when I reviewed that weary time, that I did not succumb. I remember one day—it was just when we were leaving Bournemouth—I felt more than half inclined

to capitulate to the enemy without further resistance; and I really believe I should have done so, had there not been in my heart that lurking, and I may say truly, that *unconscious* partiality for Philip. Something, I could not tell what—I know now, it was God's merciful Providence— withheld me, and I *could not* rush upon my fate. You, who comprehend all that the Duke of Acresworth really was, will not wonder that I could not bring myself to make the awful sacrifice."

"No, indeed. I know more of his profligacy, his unscrupulous, heartless wickedness than I dare confess to you, Clare. I knew what his Duchess had to bear in her lifetime; I knew how all her days were darkened, and herself brought to a premature grave, through his shameful and violent conduct—for she had loved him devotedly once, poor thing; loved him as only a true *wife* can love."

"My cousin told me that he was about to be married ; it was almost the last time she mentioned him, if not the very last. Is it true ?"

"I cannot certainly say, but I fancy it is. He is betrothed, it is alleged, to a very celebrated *danseuse*, known to the world as *Mademoiselle Palmyre*. She has *fascinated* him, gossip says ; and like a prudent woman—if not exactly a virtuous one—she kept him at arm's length till the marriage contract was signed."

"And will the world receive her as Duchess of Acresworth, think you ?"

"No doubt it will ; for she will be his wife in the eyes of the law ; and 'Society' holds that rank and riches combined may cover a multitude of sins. Let us talk of him no more, Clare ; we can say nothing but what is evil of him ; let us leave him to a higher tribunal than our poor weak judgment. Only we will be thankful, intensely thankful, that *you* altogether escaped him. A thousand times better you had joined your fate to that of some poor, honest son of toil, than have married, with all possible state and ceremony, the Duke of Acresworth. But now I want to ask you—I am sadly inquisitive, you perceive—have you *no* idea of the way in which Lady Forest has left her property ?"

"Not the least. I try to think nothing at all about it. She talked once, when she was so bitterly incensed at what she called my *wicked perversity*, of making her will in favour of the Earlswood Asylum for Idiots, or the Foundling Hospital. She signed her will as lately as last week, Mr. Bellingham tells me, and it is safe in her *bureau*, and will not see the light till the funeral is over. She made me fully understand that my engagement to Philip Warner did not please her, and I was to expect nothing from her; not even a modest *dot*, which I must confess would have been extremely acceptable, seeing how poorly we are at present dowered in this world's possessions. No; I have not a notion. I cannot even remotely guess how the money is left, nor yet how *much* it is. The fairest way would have been to divide it, share and share alike, among those who could claim kindred with herself."

"Well, I suppose we shall know all about it next Tuesday, and now it is Saturday evening."

CHAPTER XL.

HER LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT.

"The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Await alike the inevitable hour:
The paths of glory lead but to the grave."

THE days passed heavily in the shut-up, darkened house. Mr. Bellingham undertook all responsibilities relating to the funeral, only stipulating that Miss Darlington would see that the household was put into the proper regulation mourning. The servants held high carnival below stairs. Tarleton and Janet and Mrs. Ross cultivated sober intimacy in the housekeeper's room, while Clare and Miss Vanderquist did their best to be as cheerful as possible under the somewhat depressing circumstances.

Clare would fain have made her escape when the Sunday morning broke clear and bright, after a night of tempest, but the fates were certainly against her. Breakfast was not served till an unusually late hour ; and then when the church-bells were chiming, and the streets were crowded with a church-going population, and while she was wondering whether she could not manage to defy criticism and slip out to the morning service, Mr. Bellingham was announced, and when he had said all that he came to say, or at least as much as he could remember, for he had carelessly left his notebook at home, it was almost time for some of the congregations to be dispersing.

In the evening, however, under cover of the darkness, Clare did succeed in finding her way to one of the nearest churches. Dorothea had gone home for the day, promising to return before bed-time ; but she had left Janet in Lowndes Square, and Clare was very glad to impress her as humble chaperone, Tarleton respectfully but firmly declining to leave the house upon any pretence.

Dorothea came back almost sooner than her friend had expected her ; and while they were at supper they had some conversation on the survival of barbarous usages, as portrayed by the rigid etiquette of funeral ceremony.

"I am glad you took Janet," said Miss Vanderquist. "I am doing all I can to teach her common-sense ; I hope she saw the absurdity of poor Tarleton's idea of fashionable decorum. When will truth and reason assert themselves, I wonder ? when will man and woman rise superior to the time-honoured ritual which is supposed to govern all their actions ? A death in a family seems to involve the same sort of penitential abasement, the same seclusion, the same depth of outward mourning for one who is merely legally akin, as for one most tenderly beloved."

"Dorothea, you are a rich woman, and you have influence. Why do you not protest against the ridiculous code which makes slaves and hypocrites of us all ? Here we are, shut up in semi-darkness, as if we were so overwhelmed with grief that we could not bear a glimpse of heaven's sunshine ; we are denied *air*, the services of the sanctuary, which might be supposed to be some alleviation to one's sorrow, and

many of the common amenities of life. People in ‘good society’ are required to make a sort of moral *suttee* of themselves in honour of their departed relatives.”

“And yet there are times when one is fain to shut oneself up with one’s bitter and irremediable grief—irremediable, as far as earth is concerned, certainly. Have you not felt that you must be alone with your sorrow; that only the heart knows its own anguish and sense of loss; that there are occasions when you would fain set a barrier between yourself and the busy, careless world; when you say in your inmost soul ‘miserable comforters are ye all?’”

“Have I not felt it? Do I not know what it is to be alone with *death*, and to crave no human companionship? Dolly, when my father died, I, in a certain sense, seemed to die also. I cared neither for food, nor light, nor intercourse with my fellow-creatures; the very darkness of the tomb, as it were, encompassed me. But that is such a different thing from the mere decorum of grief—the outward show that tyrant fashion compels. I suppose the real mischief consists in the innate want of *truth*; the recognised insincerity that goes so far to make our ordinary worldly life a specious but vulgar lie.”

“Yes, I believe you are right. The lack of truth in little things, the cowardice which makes us ashamed of our convictions; the devotion to *shams*, which leads so many of us, who really know better, into all sorts of foolish inconsistencies, is at the very root of half the fatal errors and blunders of the world. I have an infinite respect for the people called ‘Friends,’ who refuse to dissimulate at the command of social tyranny.”

“And yet one would scarcely choose to discard *all* signs of outward mourning?”

“Well, I suppose one *is* apt to run into extremes. There can certainly be no objection to simply wearing *black* raiment, if we like to do so; but oh! the awful weight of *crêpe* that was used as ‘trimming’ when my poor Aunt Caroline died. Certainly, she left me plenty of money to pay for it, so on the score of expense I had no ground of complaint; but the personal inconvenience was excessive, as the demise took place early in May—when I was required to

be in the very deepest mourning, although it was an early and oppressively hot summer—it followed that I was forced into a sort of martyrdom till October mercifully set in cold and damp, and I was delivered from my cruel penance. But do you know, Clare, I could tell you of cases in which a whole family has suffered all the miseries of protracted debt and the want of many comforts, as the result of wearing costly mourning, and doing the whole thing in proper style. The undertaker, the draper, and the dressmaker, perhaps, reaped solid benefit from the sacrifice, for it is indeed an ill wind that blows good to nobody ; but for many a day the voluntary victims themselves were in many ways all the worse for their deference to a tyrannical custom. It was very poor consolation to reflect that, however much they were straitened and perplexed, they were at least wearing the most orthodox of mourning, and they had paid the last duties to the departed one, *regardless of expense*."

"And what is your opinion of the practice of compelling the survivors to dwell in darkness ?"

"In the main it is simply absurd, according to my idea ; but, of course, there are two sides to this question as to every other. The closed blinds warn outsiders that they *may* intrude if they present themselves at the door ; and I think there is a certain sense of fitness in darkening the chamber of death itself. But why survivors should subject themselves to the inconvenience of continual obscurity I never could divine ; *we* could not see to read or write yesterday, you know, and the young woman who is at work on the servants' mourning demanded a general lighting-up before she would consent to thread her needle."

"It comes to this, surely. One should not bow to mere prejudice, or defer to fashionable tyranny, because of any unwritten law of custom ; but calmly examine the merits of the so-called *etiquette*. One should be fully persuaded in one's own mind, and act from the dictates of a rational prudence and a Christian sense of what is actually duty, and in the fitness of things, as a reasonable member of the community of God's professing people."

"Exactly so. Nothing can be safer than the rule which binds us to a conscientious discharge of even the minor

obligations of life, whether as Christians or as right-minded citizens of the world ; always considering the good of society at large, and especially the benefit of those weaker brethren and sisters who have not the courage to cast off their burdens for themselves. Now, Clare, that we have pledged ourselves to a sort of ‘Funeral Reform Association,’ shall we not go to bed ?—for I took advantage of the fine afternoon to visit several of my regular pensioners, and I must confess to being awfully tired. Being shut up in darkened, imperfectly-ventilated rooms certainly does not conduce to vigorous health : and the living suffer without benefiting the dead.”

The next day was not quite so tedious, for there was really a great deal to be attended to ; dinner had to be ordered, for Sir Francis Darlington was expected in the evening, and Dorothea volunteered to drive in her own carriage to Covent Garden, and procure flowers for the decoration of the table. She insisted, too, on Clare accompanying her, for the world in general could scarcely be so inconsiderately unkind as to wish to debar her from a little fresh air because her kinswoman lay dead in the house. Tarleton looked very grave as they drove away, but it was some consolation to reflect that Miss Vanderquist was only a visitor, and would be recognised as such by most of the neighbours, if they troubled themselves to notice the carriage at all ; while Miss Darlington, with her veil down, just stepping from the hall-door, might reasonably hope to escape observation.

The friends enjoyed their ride very much, for the morning was bright and sunny, and the chrysanthemums in the great floral market brought to their minds the annual display in the Temple Gardens. So they had the temerity to drive along the Strand, and leaving the carriage in a by-street, inspect the beautiful exhibition for themselves. “ Tarleton will never know anything about it,” laughed Clare, as they pursued their way past Paper Buildings to the glass houses where the treasures were. “ Your coachman is not intimate, I hope, with any of our servants, for in her case I am sure ignorance will be bliss, and she will think ever so much the worse of *me* if she is aware of the rash escapade.”

Evening brought Sir Francis ; and though he presented

the demure face of a professed mourner, he had a good deal to say for himself and all the Chilling Towers news to communicate. Quite naturally, too, he evinced some curiosity about the mysterious will which was to be read publicly in that very room on the morrow. It was not at all impossible that he might be himself the heir, Clare ventured to suggest. Mr. Bellingham, who had been asked to dine with Sir Francis, declared that he was not a little inquisitive to know the contents of this marvellous document that had survived so many of its kindred, and of which he knew literally nothing, though he had superintended the legal signatures.

"Am I to understand then, Mr. Bellingham," asked Sir Francis, "that *you* are actually in entire ignorance of your late client's disposition of her effects?"

"It is not very professional to answer such a question," returned the lawyer gravely; "but in this case I need not be superfluously formal; it cannot in any way be construed into the remotest breach of confidence, if I admit that I know no more about the instrument in question than do the servants in the kitchen, or Miss Vanderquist, who, I believe, has not seen Lady Forest since they parted almost ten months ago under your own roof, Sir Francis. My lady, I suppose, changed her mind so many times that she was a little ashamed, and perceived the extreme desirability of a prudent reserve. I have reason to believe some of the servants are remembered, those who are not now in this service, I mean;—but I have no authority for saying so much, I may be entirely out of my reckoning."

"I simply know," said Clare, "that she made a new will, even before I left her house last April, excluding *me* from any hope of inheriting the meanest pittance."

"I know all about that will," said Mr. Bellingham, smiling. "Dear me, how violently angry your poor cousin was, Miss Darlington, because you refused to fall in with her cherished plans. She was dreadfully afraid lest I should leave any possible loophole through which you might creep in and claim the veriest trifles; she was really about as much exasperated as a lady could be. However, that will is undoubtedly destroyed;—the one which I am bound to present to you to-morrow is the only one, to the

best of my belief, still in existence, and whatever may be its provisions we have to abide by them. Earlswood or the Foundling may be the heir, or, in spite of all that has happened, Miss Darlington herself; or even the respectable Mrs. Tarleton, for all that I know to the contrary!"

When the ladies had gone to the drawing-room, Sir Francis again asked Mr. Bellingham whether he was absolutely in the profound ignorance he had professed?—had he no suspicion of Lady Forest's intentions towards the last?

To which the lawyer replied, "I call that a very leading question, Sir Francis, and if we were in a Court of Justice I would be constrained to return as evasive an answer as might be admissible. As we are situated, however, quite alone, and no interests depending upon the confession, I do not mind acknowledging that I *cannot* guess at the contents of the forthcoming will. Dr. Mowbray ventured to suggest to my late client that she should lose no time in settling her worldly affairs; and she, being obliged to own herself how very ill she was, thought it only prudent to follow his advice. I did not draw up the will; I was not even favoured with a sight of the rough copy—if, indeed, there ever was one. My lady was a woman of business, as I dare say you know well enough; she had had practice enough in making wills, and, moreover, I had furnished her, long ago, with the proper form, and she had only to fill up with names and particulars at her leisure. I have no doubt that to-morrow I shall find the document, in all respects, perfectly straightforward and strictly legal, for no one had sounder common-sense—when she chose to use it—than Lady Forest; also, she had sufficient legal knowledge to prevent her from doing anything at all absurd. Her temper was peculiar, I grant; she was imperious to a fault, she was capricious and fickle in her likes and dislikes almost to a proverb; also, in a lower class of life, she would certainly have figured as a *virago*; but her shrewdness was remarkable, and there was a spice of generosity in her character which, if she had only cultivated it, might have developed into magnanimity."

The next morning, at a comparatively early hour, the undertaker's men were in the house, and the last act com-

menced of the melancholy drama. Again was heard the muffled tread, the subdued shuffle, the lowered tones—alas! who does not know them?—and, towards noon, the mourning-coaches and the plumed hearse stood at the door; and the *mutes*, with their strange insignia of office, were posted on either side of the broad threshold. The blinds were lowered in the adjoining and opposite houses; the neighbourhood apparently was inclined to pay all respects to the memory of its late inhabitant.

“Can anything be more absurd than those creatures calling themselves ‘*mutes*’?” said Dorothea, as she surreptitiously peeped through a crevice. “I wonder if the idea was taken from the hired mourners of the Orientals?”

“Very probably. I am not at all well up in the *ology* of funeral ceremonies. But, Dolly, I am content that the men should be there; it does not hurt us, and it is just what she would have delighted in herself. She loved state, and pomp, and formality, poor dear, with all her heart; and Mr. Bellingham tells me he has endeavoured to ensure the exact repetition of the solemn obsequies of Sir Raymond Forest, as ordered and controlled by herself, and he thinks he has succeeded. Of course, everything has been left in Mr. Bellingham’s hands. I quite intended, as you know, to follow myself, but he thought it better to exclude the feminine element altogether; *she* would strenuously have objected to so unorthodox a proceeding, he assured me.”

“Tarleton does not follow, then, nor the nurse?”

“No, they remain with us at home. But Weller makes his appearance, also the respectable functionary who has succeeded him, and, I suppose, the other male servants. Dr. Mowbray follows in his own carriage, Mr. Bellingham in his, and Sir Francis in a private coach, specially retained on his account.”

Ere long, the heavy but muffled tread resounded in the darkened mansion, and all that was mortal of poor Lady Forest was borne in its splendid coffin down the broad stairs, and through the familiar hall, and across the threshold, that her feet might tread nevermore; and so into the richly plumed and velvet-draped hearse, drawn by four coal-black steeds richly caparisoned in the superbest mourning array.

The place that knew her would know her no more for ever—a little while and the clods would cover her ; she would be laid in the quiet grave, in the stately "*mausoleum*" which had been her own design ; and in death she would rest once more by him who had been for so many years her husband.

In about two hours the mourners returned, and after the proper refreshment had been taken, all adjourned to the dining-room, where Mr. Bellingham, having caused the household to be assembled, opened and read the momentous document. Clare had cried till her head ached, for, on the disappearance of the melancholy train, she had felt unable to repress her emotion, and would willingly have remained in her own room had not the lawyer and Sir Francis insisted on her remaining throughout the ceremony.

There was, of course, a dead silence, and everybody listened with breathless attention. It was well known that Lady Forest had died a very wealthy woman, but how that wealth would be distributed, no one—as we have already seen—could even guess. Mr. Bellingham commenced in a sonorous tone. There was the usual preamble, evidently copied from the printed form, and then followed legacies to Tarleton, to Weller, and to Mrs. Goswell of £250 each. Smaller sums were bequeathed to some of the inferior servants who had, at one time or other, served the Testatrix; and all domestics lately engaged, and forming part of the household staff at the date of her death, were to receive £5 or £10, according to position, besides two good suits of mourning, and a copy of the last photograph taken of their deceased mistress.

Then came the real *dénouement* of the whole business. "I also devise and bequeath," proceeded Mr. Bellingham, "all the residue of my estate and property, houses, lands, leases, money in the Funds, balance in the Bank, and all of which I may die possessed—after my just debts are paid ; also my mansion in Lowndes Square, together with my furniture, linen, plate, jewels, carriages, books, pictures, china, and all my personal effects, to Clare, only daughter and sole surviving child of my late cousin, Richard Darlington, and Fanny, *née* Stewart, his wife ; the said Richard Darlington demising at Paris rather more than two years ago.

And it is my desire that the said Clare Darlington should succeed, without prejudice, or let, or hindrance, to all and everything I leave behind me, the aforesaid legacies alone excepted."

Then followed a codicil, bequeathing to Mr. Bellingham himself £1,000 and a diamond ring; a diamond ring to Dr. Mowbray; and a certain silver cream-jug to Mrs. Ross as a memento of her faithful kindness. And this was the "Last Will and Testament" of Clare, Lady Forest, Relict of Sir Thomas Raymond Forest, Knight; signed by her own hand, and in the presence of witnesses.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE HEIRESS.

" Since you will buckle Fortune on my back,
To bear her burden, whether I will or no,
I must have patience to endure the load ! "

" ALLOW me to congratulate you, Miss Darlington," said Mr. Bellingham, when he had quite completed his task; " my late respected client has followed out the advice I should certainly have offered had I dared to presume so far as to give utterance to my own opinions. I was terribly afraid Earlswood, or else the Foundling Hospital, or Hanwell even, might be named as residuary legatee. The will, too, is beautifully clear in every one of its provisions; if there existed any angry rival desirous of contest, he would certainly not have a leg to stand upon. The whole document is strictly legal and indisputable, save in one unimportant point, and that is in the codicil."

" Not your own legacy ? "

" By no means, the Lord High Chancellor himself, with all the Courts of Law assisting, could not deprive me of my pleasant and very unexpected windfall. It is our good

doctor here who *might* be made to suffer for the testatrix's little slip of memory, for she was certainly well aware of the obligation which provides that the witnesses shall be persons *not* benefiting by the legal document. In this case it does not at all matter ; you, Miss Darlington, will have to deal with the irregularity ; you will simply have to construe the bequest into an expressed *wish*, and act accordingly."

"That explains something she said on the night of my arrival. A valuable diamond ring, one Sir Raymond had presented on their wedding, was slipping from her wasted finger. She always wore it—I had never seen her without it—but now, it was a mile too large ; and, as I noticed it lying on the counterpane, she said, 'Take it yourself, and wear it in remembrance of me, I should not wish any one else to have it ; I thought of having it buried with me, but on second thoughts I will not ; if it were known, some wretch might rifle my tomb for the sake of the gems.' And then she rambled off into a story about some wealthy old dowager whom Tarleton had once served, and who was buried in a priceless point-lace shawl, and in as many of her jewels as her fingers and wrists would accommodate. She did not finish the marvellous account ; she suddenly forgot what she was saying, and, in the middle of it, broke off to observe that she left it to me to see that Dr. Mowbray had *his* ring, for she had made a mistake about it. I put my own ring away, for it was too large for me, and thought no more about it, nor did I ever think of Dr. Mowbray in connection with any kind of jewellery till five minutes ago. But she certainly did say something about *black* diamonds ; she possessed some which are extremely valuable."

"Which are yours now, Clare !" interrupted Sir Francis. "My dear, permit me to say that I am fully satisfied with Lady Forest's *will*. Neither Lady Rosamund nor myself had the least expectation of being named in it—all is exactly as it should be. I am delighted to think you have succeeded to the inheritance which was intended for you, and which was only diverted for a season by a circumstance that will always redound to your honour. Do you know, Clare, that you are a very rich woman—one of the very richest whom I have the pleasure of knowing ?"

For answer, Clare burst into tears. The strain of the past week, and now the sudden news of her most unexpected fortune coming upon her like a shock, was quite too much for her. She continued to weep profusely, and seemed so unable to control her sobs, that Dr. Mowbray, fearing an attack of hysteria, requested Miss Vanderquist to take her away while he procured the necessary restorative. Not that Clare Darlington was by any means an hysterical personage, nor was she even unduly inclined to what Tarleton always called "the vapours," by which she meant a morbid lachrymose tendency. But she was decidedly of nervous temperament, and she had gone through a great deal during the last few days ; moreover, she was suffering no little reaction after the excitement which had supervened on the terrors of the inundation, and Dr. Mowbray's prescription was just the thing for her. Very little medicine, but perfect quiet ; small doses of cordial or tonic, and plenty of nourishment, administered in frequent light and delicate repasts. Dorothea remained as head nurse ; and Mr. Bellingham, with a promise to attend to everything requiring attention, begged her to send for him should the slightest difficulty present itself. Tarleton, at first, would not hear of leaving the house ; but as Janet remained with her mistress, and Mrs. Ross had no pressing engagement for several weeks to come, and her betrothed Weller was anxiously awaiting her advent as lawful comptroller of the eligible premises he had taken not five hundred yards away from Lowndes Square, she hoped dear Miss Darlington would not take it unkindly of her, nor think her disrespectful or "oblivious" of the memory of the dear departed, if she allowed Weller to put up the banns at an earlier date than had been at first intended.

And, of course, Clare assured her that she would not on any account put her to the slightest inconvenience. She had acted with the greatest consideration already ; the marriage had from several causes been long deferred ; and now, as the happy lovers had successfully steered their barque into smooth waters, nothing remained but to consult their own interests, and cast anchor for life as speedily as was possible.

"For you see, ma'am," said Tarleton—when she had shed

a few natural tears and wiped them away again, and genteelly sipped a glass of that special old Madeira which had been ordered for "my poor, dear defunct lady"—"neither Weller nor me can call ourselves at all youthful. 'There was a song the lasses used to sing when I was quite a child—'I'm ower young to marry yet.' And there was a time when it might have suited me as well as any ; for I had heaps of sweethearts once upon a time, when I was sweet sixteen ; and I might have had my pick, I assure you, Miss Clare ; only, I never was a flirt, and yet couldn't make up my mind which of them I'd take. Then I got into good service and began to save money ; and I grew that prudent I took to despising matrimony and thinking I was best and comfortablest by myself, and I wouldn't have listened to the finest fellow you ever saw. But it's all very well when you are young and your life is all before you. And I got tired of service ; and my poor dear departed lady *was* trying at times, and there's no denying it ; and I thought what would become of me in my old age if I was all alone in the world—a poor despised old maid, with all my relations carneying to me to leave them my bit of money. And Weller, he says, 'service is not inheritance' ; and I says, 'No, it isn't, Weller.' And that was several years ago, and we've courted on and off ever since, and he keeps insisting that we shall never be younger, and that time is flying, and that if we don't make hay while the sun shines we're very much to blame. And he says he won't be trifled with ; and so I do think, ma'am—if you don't really object—I'll tell him he may put up the banns as soon as ever he likes, and we can get married in time for Christmas, and take our pleasure, like sober married people, on Boxing Day."

"I am sure, Tarleton, I shall be quite pleased to know you are Mrs. Weller. I think you have waited long enough, and, as you say truly, you are no longer very youthful, and it behoves you to make the best of your remaining days. You must let me give you a good, handsome, useful dress, suitable for the winter—the wedding dress, I think you told me, is already made—and which would you prefer, a pretty china tea-and-coffee service, or a good stout tea-pot ? "

"Thank you a thousand times, Miss Darlington, I think

I'd like the tea-service best, for I haven't got one, and my old aunt left me her best tea-pot, which *looks* quite as well as silver, if it isn't the genuine thing exactly. But I'll consult Weller—as is my duty to, I suppose—and I'll let you know, Miss Darlington, and of course I'll be proud to wear your dress."

"And I should like you to choose some nice little thing of your late lady's—something that she used herself—as a sort of keepsake, you know."

"It's just what I would desire, ma'am. I've been hoping you might propose it, but I should never have breathed a syllable if you hadn't been that condescendingly encouraging that I felt I dared to presume. Then, ma'am, if I *might* take the little black and gold timepiece that stands on the mantel board in my dear lady's *boudoir*—that she's heard strike so many times,—I should feel deeply indebted, and I should be a happy woman."

"Then pray be happy," returned Clare, smiling; "it is delightful to think of happiness so cheaply purchased. And stay in this house just as long as it suits you, and not an hour longer."

The end of it all was that Tarleton left within a few days, on the plea that she had so very much to attend to, and that Weller, left to himself, was no better than a quarrelsome dog with a lame leg, and was sure to make a thousand blunders, and get into all sorts of messes. Besides, she meant to begin as she would have to go on; and it was only prudent to take a man "in hand" at once, when you meant to hold the reins yourself. So the *banns* were duly put up, and the wedding came off with all possible *éclat*, and Mr. and Mrs. Weller spent *two* "happy days" by way of honeymoon in the renowned vicinity of Rosherville.

But we are outstripping the course of our narrative; only it seemed just as well to dismiss Mr. and Mrs. Weller from our pages with all due honours, as they have no further connection with the story of the Abbey Mill heroine, and at this stage disappear entirely from our view. Most probably they are still keeping the very respectable and highly-lucrative greengrocer's shop which had been so long the goal of their ambition. Whether Mrs. W. succeeded in keeping Mr. W. "well in hand," we cannot presume to say; but we did hear

a faint whisper to the effect that there had been what their friends chose to call a "scrimmage" for the *reins*; and a serious misunderstanding in more than one most important particular.

At the end of a week Clare began to be pretty well again, and she was thinking of the advisability of sending for Tessie to come and bear her company in her wide, lonely house at Lowndes Square, for there was no longer any need for Tessie to seek an engagement; and how joyfully her heart beat when first it flashed upon her mind that it lay now with herself to set everybody at ease, and to make all necessary arrangements! Dorothea had been with her nearly a fortnight, and the time was approaching when she would have to keep the engagements to which she was pledged. One of them was to spend a week at Chilling Towers; and Clare also was invited, but, for manifold reasons, chose rather to decline.

"And you are quite sure you must return home next Thursday, Dolly?" she inquired, as they sat debating many things one evening, after tea; for the regular late dinner had been voted an institution of the past ever since the young mistress of the house had been invalided. "Must you really go so soon?"

"I have made quite a long visit, my dear, and I must be setting out on my travels again directly. I wish you could make up your mind to go with me to Chilling Towers. It would be delightful to be there together once more, and no Duke and no Flora Haberton to trouble us."

"Poor Flora! Do you know what she is doing just now, Dorothea?"

"Doing mischief, no doubt. Flora is one of those persons who must be making themselves conspicuous at any price. Rosamund was so much annoyed that she vowed she would never have her in her house again, and Sir Francis, who never cordially liked her, was very glad to think he would be troubled with her no more. She is living at Bath, I believe, with an old aunt, whom she describes as a 'horrible cross-patch'; unless, indeed, she has succeeded in deluding some unfortunate into asking her to pay a visit. She likes nothing better than staying for an indefinite time

in a pleasant country house ; and we all like that sort of thing pretty well, I suppose, only, neither you nor I, nor any of our friends, I hope, care to play pranks, and turn the house upside down ; and I for my part have a wholesome horror of wearing out my welcome."

" You will never wear out your welcome in this house if it be really mine, as it does seem to be," said Clare, thoughtfully, after a short silence. " Do you know, I am extremely sorry for Miss Haberton. Lady Rosamund told me that she had been very improperly brought up, and that she had mixed with all sorts of objectionable people. Moreover, she had no genuine position ; she was very much at the mercy of her wealthier kindred, and was frequently compelled, sorely against her will, to enact the *rôle* of ' poor relation.' And she had been so imprudent, Lady Rosamund went on to say, as deeply to offend her best and truest friends ; so that she had actually no home."

" It must be sad, indeed, to have no home. But I should say she never will have one, unless she marries, and if she behaves frequently as she did at Chilling Towers, she will never ' settle comfortably,' as she often calls marrying. It is very good of you, Clare, to be sorry for her, for she frightened you almost out of your senses, and she had no compassion on your nerves. I used to be sorry for her, but I am afraid I am not now ; I cannot stretch the point an inch farther than just being in Christian charity with her. If she were in actual trouble, I hope I should try to help her out of it ; I cannot say more."

" Dolly, you are very good and kind ; your kindness to me from the first hour we met has been wonderful ; but then, you *took to me*."

" Of course I took to you—most people do, I think ; but what then ? "

" Must we not love our enemies as well as our friends ? Should we not, as Christ's followers, repay good for evil ? "

" Of course we should, and I trust I should gladly do Flora a good turn if the opportunity presented itself. What are you thinking about ? "

" Not about Flora, I confess. Dolly, you know something of my previous history—how poor and friendless I was two

years ago? Well, just now I am thinking chiefly about that."

"I know how good the dear cousins at the Abbey Mill have proved themselves, for you are never tired of singing their praises, one and all. And Clare, I must tell you that if you had been less grateful to them than you are I could not have loved you so well; I should scarcely have esteemed you, nor believed in your friendship, knowing now the whole history of the last few months."

"I owe *them* more than ever I can repay. My new position, which I am only just beginning to realise, fills me with ever increasing and untold happiness every time I reflect on the power I now possess to dispel all their anxieties. They made me one of themselves. I shared their comparative poverty; they shall share my wealth. I was indeed, a stranger, poor and lonely, when they 'took me in' and gave me a place in their blessed, happy home. And now my home shall be their home, and my purse their purse. God willing, nothing shall ever separate them from me; and I love Philip a hundred times more than I should have done, for that opening of his heart and showing me all his goodness and unselfishness in being resolved to throw in his lot with those best of friends, and share his all with them. But *that* is not quite what is perplexing me."

"What, then, may it be? You are not harassing yourself with the fancy that Philip may say he plighted his troth to poor Clare Darlington, with her fifty pounds a-year, and her soaring literary ambitions, and not to Lady Forest's rich heiress?"

"That thought *has* crossed my mind, I must confess, for I remember that long ago—almost in the first days of our intimacy, when I was a proud, graceless girl, and loved nothing better than the pomps and vanities of this world—he said that nothing could tempt him to marry an heiress."

"That means a woman like me, for I was born an heiress, and riches would seem to have an electrical attraction to riches—for money, in some shape or other, is always falling into my lap. I was born wealthy, and I have

inherited three fortunes. But in your case all is different ; you were no heiress when Mr. Warner wooed you to be his wife, and he will scarcely dream of being false to his troth because the poor girl he has vowed to love and claim for his bride turns out to be a rich one. And supposing all this had happened a little later, *after* you were married to him say, he would have been obliged to accept your fortune, whether he wished it or not. He could scarcely sue for *a divorce*, or even for a legal separation, on the ground of incompatibility of *income*. And from what you tell me of your Philip, I should say he counts himself as already yours for life. A true-hearted man, such as you would love, and who would love you, would not wait to exchange the vow *till death us do part*—till he stood absolutely at the marriage altar. Depend upon it he ‘dates his marriage’ from the day you permitted him to call you *his*. His first kiss on your lips sealed the compact of union ; he will never give you up.”

“I trust not ; and as the promise was given on both sides before the fortune came, I feel that I shall dare to speak out boldly and refuse to be released, even though he urge it. But that is not what is troubling me just now. Listen, Dolly ; did you ever hear anything of some other cousins of mine, rather low-born cousins, who treated me unkindly, and flouted me because I was poor and alone in the world—who showed me, by every word and action, how much they hated and despised me ?”

“I did hear, in some way, that you had other cousins who were *not* Darlings, and with whom you were unhappy before you went into Moorlandshire ; but I know nothing about them, for I do not remember at this moment that you ever made them the subject of conversation between us.”

“I dare say not ; their very name at one time was *hateful* to me. They live in North Tyburnia ; they are rich enough, though scarcely so rich as I am now, I fancy ; but they are low bred, and hollow-hearted. My aunt—my uncle’s wife—is actually vulgar ; and her six daughters, my cousins, are none of them ladies. We met last winter at a grand fancy-fair, a little while before we went into

Chalkshire, and they were there, very busily trying to be on terms with their superiors—they were always struggling after rank and position, poor things ! and I think I may, without being uncharitable, say that they were always ready to eat any amount of dirt as the price of being recognised in certain quarters. Well, Dolly, they let me go from them with scarcely any money in my pocket, and not even a luncheon basket to keep up my spirits ; and they never cared to inquire as to what became of me. They were astonished when they found me much more elegantly attired than themselves, and associated with the very class of people they were so intensely anxious to cultivate. Of course, they would have been delighted to acknowledge me *there and then* ; my aunt did come up to the stall where I stood laughing and talking with Lady Evelyn Branksome, and paid her compliments, and I—don't despise me too much for it, Dorothea—I gave her the *cut direct* ; I professed not to recognise her. She went away in dire confusion, poor woman, and with tears in her eyes. I had had my *revenge*. But revenge is not for women who name the name of Christ. Now, ought I not at once to hold out the white flag of reconciliation ? Should I not apologise for my rudeness—for it was rudeness, you know, dear? Should I not, in taking up my new position, show them that I am willing, anxious even, to forget and to forgive ? ”

“ I think you should, dear. We cannot be Christians and cherish enmity against those who have maltreated us. But, Clare, count the cost before you take any overt proceeding.” *

“ I know it will cost me something ; that it will be a hard struggle, indeed, to extend the olive branch to them. I would rather take Flora Haberton to my bosom than I would shake hands with my Aunt Stewart.”

“ That proves, then, that it *is* your duty to make the painful effort. We are bidden, as much as lieth in us, to ‘live peacefully with all men.’ Take courage, Clare, and remember the old proverb, ‘ *Ce n'est que le premier pas qui coûte.* ’ But where did I hear the name of Stewart, and in connection with North Tyburnia, too? Did the Stewarts live in Kilmarnock Gardens ? ”

"Yes, they did."

"Then I am afraid they are in sad trouble. The firm with which Mr. Stewart was connected is declared bankrupt."

CHAPTER XLII.

SPECULATION.

"All's to be feared where all is to be lost."

WE must go back a little in our chronology—in order to explain things quite clearly—to one dull drizzling morning in the month of October; and we must return for a little while to the highly genteel but rather monotonous neighbourhood of North Tyburnia.

Now we cannot doubt that there is a tide in the affairs of men which, being taken at the flood, leads on to fortune, for we have it upon no less an authority than that of *Shakespeare*. But there are some persons who can never be quite sure whether or not the tide has turned; and so the voyage of life drifts into shallows after all, for they are just a moment too late in the enterprise, and the unlucky adventurers find to their dismay that the shower of gold in which they so much rejoiced is *only* a shower, which after a time ceases to be auriferous, and ends in common vulgar rain. Or the sun, perhaps, shines on the falling drops, and so deludes some sanguine folk into the pleasant belief that for them at least the much-vaunted "Age of Gold" has come back again, when suddenly behind the clouds retires the god of day, greyer and greyer grows the canopy overhead, the storm descends, the thunder rolls, and the supernatural brightness is at an end.

All of which preamble is to the effect that one day—one most dismal and portentous day—Mr. John Thomas Stewart, of 27, Kilmarnock Gardens, awoke to an uneasy suspicion

of things being a little wrong with the “Tyburnian Building Company (Limited).” It was a mere suspicion—nothing more, all might be safe and sound, there might not be anything in the least *rotten* in the “state of Denmark!” Screws might not be loose, albeit it looked very much like it to those whose apprehensions were awakened; “rainbow-tinted bubbles” might not be just about to collapse, although they were, in the eyes of timorous and over-cautious mortals, “too beautiful to last.” The day of reckoning might not be at hand just yet; and yet it was whispered about among those whom it most deeply concerned that there was a terrible deficit *somewhere* in the Tyburnian accounts.

Mr. Stewart was far from happy when he contemplated the state of affairs. One of the leading directors admitted that he was a *leetle* afraid the company had *overbuilt* themselves, and this fact might occasion a temporary inconvenience, and the dividends would be, perhaps, for half a year or so, not *quite* so profitable as they had been. So many houses were unlet; some splendid mansions that were to be “let *or* sold” found no purchasers—in short, money was scarce, and a good many people who were all out of the scrape were thoughtless enough to congratulate themselves, in the hearing of those who had made large investments, on their own superior prudence and sagacity.

It did not take long to bring matters to a crisis. A few weeks had sufficed to bring the mushroom company into existence—nay, into seeming prosperity—and it had its brief day of triumph, glory, and success. A few weeks, too, were quite enough for its most disastrous downfall. Almost before some of the shareholders had begun to tremble, and long before many of them at all suspected the blow that was impending, down came the dread avalanche of ruin. In one week the shares came down from premium to “below *par*”; in less than a month the tocsin of alarm had been sounded, and *sauve qui peut* was the motto of those who still hoped against hope that something might be saved from the unfathomable abyss into which they had flung their wealth and, in some instances, their *credit*. And in a few days the thunderbolt fell, the Tyburnian Building Company (Limited) was declared insolvent; three of the leading directors fled;

a great number of people came to grief, and among them John Thomas Stewart, who, till within the last few weeks, had brought himself to believe that the full, flowing tide of fortune would never turn, and never, at least in his day, decline from an overwhelming flood.

Not one word did he say to the partner of his life of what might be even at the doors. Things went on up to the last at 27, Kilmarnock Gardens exactly as they had been for the last few years, "only more so!" Mrs. Stewart grumbled at her husband's low spirits, and talked a great deal about the necessity of a thorough change of air and scene; and while she discussed with her daughters the merits of various fashionable watering-places, little recked she of the rapacious wolf that would, ere many days, be clamouring at her very door.

"Well, girls, I say *Trouville*," concluded the matron, when she thought the argument had lasted quite long enough. "Scarborough is all very well, and Aberystwith is very pretty, no doubt, and I dare say the bathing is good at Tenby; but give me foreign places! We ought to go *abroad*; it was living so much abroad that gave Clare all her style and polish, I'm pretty sure; and it sounds so well, besides being altogether fresh, and adding ever so much to one's experiences. *Trouville*, I say! and I shall stick to it. I'm going to have my little whim this year, and next year you may have yours, and be off to Scarborough, or wherever else you may fancy. I shall tell papa we have finally decided on *Trouville*."

"Very well," said Sarah Anne, "I'd as soon go there as anywhere else, and perhaps sooner; only it may be a little awkward, because we none of us speak French that French people can understand; it's a pity that Victoria and Adelaide had to go back to school, but it cannot be helped, and they can have their day after we have had ours."

"Only, I do hope papa will be a little more amiable. I am sure he has been as cross as two sticks for the last three weeks; he's as glum as if he hadn't sixpence in the bank, and the other day when I asked for the money to pay for those lovely new costumes, he turned round as nasty as you please, and told me a man need be made of money to stand the expense of a wife and a lot of grown-up daughters. And I only asked him for a single cheque."

"Ah, but a single cheque may represent a good round sum of money," sneered Mary Jane; "you don't manage papa judiciously, ma; he never grumbles at *me* when I ask him for money—I know how to do it."

"Of course, you are so clever," responded Mrs. Stewart angrily; she had not been on the very best terms of late with Mary Jane, for that young lady had taken a good deal upon herself for some few months, and did not hesitate to inform "dear mamma" that it would be better for them all if she left her elder daughters to take the initiative, while she herself kept modestly in the background. Mrs. Stewart was, on the whole, painfully conscious of her own deficiencies, and she not seldom heaved a sigh in memory of the free-and-easy days when she had no one to remind her of the duty of standing on her very best behaviour. Still, she had determined in her own mind never to "knock under" to her own children, let them be ever so superior to herself; and long ago she had assured "the girls," that nothing should ever induce her to "play second fiddle" to them while she had life and breath. And there is no knowing what else Mrs. Stewart might have said, for she was just resolving to give Miss Mary Jane a piece of her mind, and have done with it,—when the door opened and on the threshold appeared the head of the family, who, in an ominous tone of voice, observed, "Ma, I want to speak to you."

"Yes, my dear," responded "ma," as suavely as it becomes wives to speak when they have unexpected proposals to make. "But can't you speak here and now? We want to settle all about Trouville, and the carriage will be coming round in a few minutes for me and Sarah Anne."

To all of which Mr. Stewart only repeated, not coming an inch farther into the room, "Ma, I want to speak to you."

"Oh, if it's anything private!—why, you look as solemn as a judge that's just going to pass sentence. What *is* the matter, John Thomas?"

"The matter is what you will not at all like to hear, Mrs. Stewart; but you'll have to know it, and the sooner the better. *We are ruined!*"

"Nonsense, John Thomas ! I don't like that sort of joke. Who has ruined us ?"

"I suppose we have done our best to ruin ourselves, and our efforts have resulted in the most complete success. The Tyburnian Building Company has come to utter smash !"

"Come to *utter smash* ?"

"Can't you understand English, Mrs. Stewart ?"

"Yes, of course I can. And I suppose something really has gone wrong, or you would not look so very down in the mouth ; tell me what it is."

"I can only repeat what I have already told you—the matter is a little too serious for a joke. The Tyburnian Building Company, Limited, is no more. Mr. Angerstein, Mr. Padmore, and several others are over the hills and far away by this time—that is to say, they are off to America or Australia—or Heaven knows where ; while I, and one or two more, are left to bear the brunt of the storm. There ! now you have it."

"Then there is no chance of our going to Trouville ?"

"There is no chance of your going anywhere, except it is to the workhouse. How can you be so utterly ridiculous ? But I really believe women are born without the usual allowance of common sense. Please to understand that we are ruined—utterly and irredeemably ruined. You know what that means, I suppose ?"

"Oh, my poor, dear, unhappy, shamefully-treated girls !" sighed Mrs. Stewart. And then she quietly fainted away, and Mr. Stewart was fain to summon assistance. But he did not summon—as might have been reasonably expected—one of his daughters ; he called Mrs. Stewart's "own maid," and very roughly bade her restore her mistress to her senses. And the maid did her best accordingly, at the same time calling her master all the brutes in the world ; for whatever could he have said that he ought to have said to bring poor mistress to such an awful state ? She would have a pretty story to tell in the servants' hall presently. "Oh, what good-for-nothing creatures husbands were !"

She was prepared to sympathise to any extent when, at length, Mrs. Stewart "came round," but no confidences were vouchsafed. "Thank you," said the afflicted lady,

when she had put aside successively *eau de Cologne*, smelling-salts, sal-volatile, and brandy and water. "I want to be alone, Smithers—don't let anybody come in here ; but tell Miss Stewart, and Miss Sarah Anne, and Miss Caroline that I have something important to disclose ; and I wish to see them in half-an-hour. In the meantime, Smithers, command the carriage ; *nobody* is going out, and nobody is at home to anybody."

Which emphatic message Smithers faithfully delivered, after she had indulged in a little suppressed amazement on her own account. Mary Jane, who had learned to value herself on her imperturbable composure, as the acme of perfect breeding, coolly replied to Smithers that she would not forget, she would be at leisure at the time appointed. Carrie had been practising with the *forte* pedal down ever since her father and mother had retired to the library, and so was blissfully unaware of anything save her own remarkable performance. Sarah Anne followed her elder sister's example, and made no observation till Smithers might be supposed to be well out of hearing. Then she said, "Mary Jane, what do you think is the matter ?"

"I should not wonder if pa refuses to let us go to Trouville," replied Mary Jane, thoughtfully. "I wish ma would leave all such questions to you and me. She *irritates* pa, there's no doubt about it, and he has not been in the sweetest of tempers lately. It will be very tiresome if we are told to get ready for Herne Bay, or Abergele, or any other place we do not care a pin for. I expect that is it. Pa looked really awful when he came in and told ma he'd something to say to her. And now ma has something to say to us, to all *three* of us. It's really very odd."

"It is." And Sarah Anne regarded her sister with unusual solemnity. "Polly!"—they called each other *Polly* and *Sally* in private and confidential moments, the names being those they had been accustomed to answer to generally in the old days, when they were known to the world as "shopkeeper's daughters," and had their abode in a respectable but unfashionable street in South Lambeth—"Polly! my mind misgives me ; but I'm afraid it is not *that*."

"It can't be anything very much worse—unless there's to

be an end of our delicious scheme of a fancy ball during the winter. Sally, you quite frighten me. You look as if somebody was ordered for execution."

"And I feel like it, too, Polly. I've a presentiment, a most awful presentiment. Father did not look like that for nothing ; something has happened."

"Sally, whatever do you mean? You make my very blood run cold. What *can* have happened—worse than being ordered off to some out-of-the-way place, where nobody wears anything that is not two seasons old? Do you think it is about money?"

"I am almost positive it is ; I'm all *but* sure—Polly, I'll give you leave to call me all the idiots that ever were, and all the alarmists that ever drew breath, if I'm wrong. Scold me, storm at me if you will, and I'll be thankful, *provided* you'll prove me altogether mistaken. I know—what I know!"

"For heaven's sake, what *do* you know? I've noticed that you haven't been in your usual spirits for nearly a week past. Has pa said anything?"

"He has and he hasn't. But last Thursday night, if you remember, I'd vowed to finish my novel before I went to bed, and the third volume was in the library. Well, I thought everybody was safe in bed, for the clock had struck *one* some time before ; so I put on a shawl over my dressing-gown, and stole downstairs as quietly as a ghost. I was very much surprised to see that a light was burning in the library, and my first thought was of thieves. After a moment's hesitation I left my candle on the upper landing, where it cast no reflection, and I glided down—I'd no shoes on, not even slippers—and made my way as noiselessly as a dream into the room where the light was which ought not to have been. At first I fancied there was nobody there ; all was so still. Then I heard a groan—oh, Polly, such a groan—and it was my father. I was going to speak, for I supposed he was ill; when he lifted up his head, and cried out—a bitter, *bitter* cry! that I knew wasn't pain of body, but pain of mind. He didn't see me, for the door wasn't wide open, and I stood well in the shadow. 'Oh, my God, my God!' he said presently ; 'must *all* go? Must I be

utterly, quite utterly ruined?' Polly, I felt like *death*, but I didn't dare to speak. I thought he'd never forgive me if I let him know I'd heard him in his sore distress, and I felt sure he was keeping it from us and from mother. For a moment I was like one stunned, but I had composure enough to go away as silently as I had come. And I got back to my own room, and no one was the wiser; only, I felt very queer, almost guilty, when I saw father next morning at the breakfast-table. I could hardly bring myself to believe it wasn't a dreadful dream."

"And you are quite sure it was not? Some dreams are so awfully like reality."

"It was no dream. I kept my own counsel, but I watched father closely, and I saw from time to time what authors call 'the shadow on his brow.' And yet he tried to be cheerful; and to make little remarks as if nothing was the matter. And he did it so well that I couldn't help asking myself whether, after all, there wasn't some absurd mistake. And yesterday morning I went out and *bought* a newspaper; hasn't it struck you as very strange that there have been no newspapers about the house lately? They have been brought in as usual, and—presently they have disappeared."

"I have never missed them, for I had my own *Lady's Newspaper* and the *Queen*; and I read them as usual, of course. But what did the paper you bought say to you?"

"It said what struck me dumb: that the 'Tyburnian Company' was nothing better than a nineteenth century 'South Sea Bubble,' a *fraud*, and a *swindle*, and I don't know what else beside. It said that everybody connected with it was ruined and beggared, except a few that had contrived to feather their nests at the expense of the credulous British public; and it went on to say that the directors would be brought to trial, and sentenced to *penal servitude* for life. Fancy anything half so awful, and poor pa—I mean, poor father, I can't call him anything else *now*—one of these very directors. But though he may be ruined, I am quite sure he never cheated, or *forged*, or conspired to swindle all the world."

"No, indeed. But did you really read all that, Sally?"

"All that, and a lot more besides. I've kept the horrid

newspaper, and I can show it you if you like ; but I would not read it if I were you, it will only make you as frantic as it made me. I could scarcely help telling you straight off yesterday, especially when all the talk was about going to Trouville, and Carrie clamoured so for Scarborough."

" And you are quite, *quite* sure there is no mistake? perhaps there are *two* Tyburnian Building Companies, and one of them *is* a sort of imposition?"

" It is *the* company that father belongs to, and there is not any possibility of mistake—I wish there were—oh! I do wish there were, Polly. There was a heap about it, and father's name was there in full, half-a-dozen times over : ' JOHN THOMAS STEWART, of *Kilmarnock Gardens.*' "

" Sally, what is to be done? There will be no sea-side outing for us now; no dance at Christmas! no amethyst velvet gowns! no *anything*! Perhaps there won't be even bread and cheese to eat, nor beds to lie on, only we *have got* the beds, that's one comfort—at least, they are better than beds, for they are the very best and most luxurious spring mattresses."

" Beds or mattresses, it is the same. The creditors will take them all from us; we shall not have the least thing to call our own."

" Who are the creditors?"

" I don't know—all the world, I should say, judging from the cruel things that paper said. But hadn't we better go to mother; it is a good half-hour since Smithers came to us. We have not time to tell Carrie; besides, she wouldn't hear us, she's hard at work at those *fortissimo* chords, and she'll know soon enough. Let her strum while she can; perhaps next week she will have no piano, not so much as a common tin-kettle of a practising piano."

And so it came to pass that poor Mrs. Stewart was spared the repetition of the miserable tale. But Sarah Anne, having confessed to the possession of a newspaper, was compelled to produce it, and read aloud all about the "fraudulent swindle." But this was a little too much for Mrs. Stewart, who, notwithstanding a good many faults, and more temper than was always pardonable, was so much of a true wife that she was furious at the accusations brought against her helpless

husband ; and she tore the offending newspaper into tatters, burst into a passion of tears, and ran to the room where the unfortunate John Thomas was sitting, disconsolately trying to realise his awful position.

"Oh, my blessed, *blessed* husband," she cried at the top of her voice ; "oh, my dear, dear John Thomas, how *dare* these wicked, *wicked* creatures call you thief, and swindler, and scoundrel, and everything that is shameful ? They deserve to be hung, they do, slandering the best man in all the world. Hanging is too good for them. They did ought to be burnt alive, they did ! I'd have them broken on the wheel !"

"Hush, hush, my dear !" replied the unhappy man. "I'm an accomplice with the rest, I suppose ; I deserve the worst that can be said about me. There, don't talk nonsense ; it can't be helped now."

"But it *shall* be helped !" cried Mrs. Stewart ; "I'll never see my husband and the father of my children dragged off to prison for offences he hasn't committed. Why, you would not harm a worm—not you. You're so soft, the most impudent impostor that ever was might get over *you*. You rob widows' houses ! When did you ever refuse the widow an alms, or grudge the orphan a bit of bread ?"

"Mary Jane, my dear, listen to reason ; I never willingly, or of intent, injured any living creature, and God knows I speak the truth. But I have leagued myself with men who actually set themselves to rob the widow and the orphan ; I have identified myself with those who have not scrupled to enrich themselves at the price of others' ruin. I see it all now, Mary Jane ; I suffered myself to be deluded and infatuated ; and when I began to suspect how things were going, I had not the courage to draw back. I have made haste to be rich, and so I have fallen into reproach, and the snare of the devil. I have been looking into the Bible this morning—I don't know when I've troubled myself about Scripture of late, but a judgment such as this makes a man pause and consider his ways—and the Bible says, 'They that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the

root of all evil.' And so it has come to pass, Mary Jane, that I have been brought to shame, and I have *fallen*—‘pierced with many sorrows.’”

“And I have been to blame,” quoth the wife. “I have urged you on to become a wealthy man; and I was not content with being merely rich, I was greedy, downright *greedy*. And now I am punished; we are all punished! Oh, my poor, dear, suffering husband!”

And then they all wept together, parents and children, and bemoaned themselves and their ruined condition, and Mrs. Stewart said, in all humility, “A great deal of it is my fault, John Thomas. I was always for speculation, you know; I was always craving for immense riches, never thinking how they might take to themselves wings, and fly away. God forgive me!”

“My dear, I take the whole blame upon myself,” rejoined Mr. Stewart. “I knew the world better than you did, and I ought to have had more common sense—shall I say, more *honesty*? For it stood to sense that in a venture like this, however plausible, a very few must be enriched at the expense of the many. This passion for *speculation* is a crying sin of the day. It’s only a sort of gambling, a game in which some *must* lose, and some few win; and the winners are accounted lucky in man’s sight, but not in God’s, I am afraid. We ought to pray, ‘Good Lord, deliver us from the wild fever of speculation.’”

CHAPTER XLIII.

LATE REMORSE.

“What is done cannot be now amended;
Men shall deal unadvisedly sometimes,
Which after-hours give leisure to repent.”

SWIFTLY, all too swiftly, came the sweeping wave that was to desolate the home of the Stewarts. The estate of the North Tyburnian Building Company (Limited)

went into liquidation, and creditors and shareholders fought furiously for their rights. Mr. Stewart was aghast when it was proved in black and white what the liabilities of the directors really were ; nor did it improve matters that *three* of them were actually flying from the pursuit of justice.

But it is only with the Stewarts we have to do ; and terrible, indeed, was their discomfiture when the Company began to wind up its affairs.

"It seems to me," said Mrs. Stewart, with a mournful shake of her head, "that if this process called 'liquidation' is to go on, nothing in the world will be left for *us*. And—there is your father, girls, talking of giving up everything that can be turned into money for the benefit of the shareholders."

"It is about the right thing to do, I suppose," said Mary Jane. "People generally seem to think we have been living for the last five years upon ill-gotten gains. We might be pariahs, our friends—as we imagined them to be—look on us so scornfully ; and as for the common tradespeople, they want ready money now for every loaf of bread they consent to leave us ; and even the milkman gave in his book yesterday, saying that he should be very much obliged to the mistress if she would settle the quarter's account *immediately*, for the dairy folks were a little afraid of their money."

"Very much afraid of it, I should think," interposed Sarah Anne. "It is simply ridiculous. We have lost all our money, and here is everybody, all at once, clamouring for payment. Tradespeople seem to have no sense and no consideration."

"Sarah Anne !" interrupted Mr. Stewart, who just then entered the room, looking extremely haggard and very much worn, "that comes very badly from you, my dear. It behoves you to remember that you are the daughter of a tradesman, and, for the matter of that, a tradeswoman, too ; for your mother had a tidy little business when I married her. She made straw bonnets when first I fell in with her, and very nice bonnets they were, and well and neatly put together ; and, Sarah Anne, in those days, when your mother and I both knew what the retail trade was, we didn't like

to stand out of our money, I can tell you. I didn't care for doubtful customers that wanted to run up a bill—not I! And as for your mother, she looked twice at a pretty bonnet that was ordered before she sent it home,—if so be she was not altogether certain when it would be paid for, or whether it would be paid for at all. Your mother knew her business, girls, and she was not easily to be imposed on."

"My dear! my dear!" implored Mrs. Stewart, almost in tears, "you might spare me a little, I think; you need not humiliate me before my own children. I don't think any of them, except perhaps Mary Jane, our first-born, ever guessed that I dirtied my hands with trade. It isn't kind of you to humiliate your own faithful wife."

"My dear," replied Mr. Stewart, "God knows I had no idea of humiliating you. You were a tidy, industrious young woman, with a living in your hands, and I was a striving young man, doing my best to pay my way and live respectably. There was no more disgrace in your plaiting and sewing straw than there was in my selling good cheese and bacon. I wish to God I could go back to that little shop where you and I worked so hard, and counted up our gains every Saturday night, and took courage and rejoiced when we had done a little better than usual."

"Yes, I know; but I'd rather not go back over old times, and I know the girls will not like it."

"I don't know, mother," said Mary Jane; "but I'm beginning to think differently about things. Honest work and honest pay isn't to be despised; and my mind misgives me, I have been a very foolish girl. Yes, I do remember that nice little shop in Blackburn Street, and the snug parlour behind, and Sarah Anne remembers it too, or I am much mistaken, for she was turned four when we moved into Westminster Bridge Road. Carry's first recollections must be of the fine *new* shop, and of the drives we used to take on Sundays in the phaeton we were so proud of—to Wimbledon, and Putney, and Balham, and all about. As for the twins, they were born after we left Blackburn Street, and Bella belongs to our *grand days*, I suppose."

"Oh, Mary Jane, how *can* you talk in that light way? We're so 'grand' now that we don't even know what is to

become of us. Still, I wouldn't for worlds go back to vulgar shop-keeping again. And as we've got to think of the future instead of the past, what's the good of humbling ourselves more than there's call for? John Thomas, I'm willing to take my share of all the trouble that has come to us, and my share of the *blame*, if there is any ; but I'll never give in to making worse of ourselves than we are. We put those old times behind us—you know we did. We got into a different *sphere*."

Which was a word that Mrs. Stewart always pronounced *speer*; but at that moment none of her daughters felt it incumbent on them to correct her. Her husband replied, " My dear Mary Jane, the 'old times' *are* behind us, every jot of them. We have got into such a new sphere *now* that I am sure I don't know where I am, nor whither I am tending, nor do I truly know *what* I am ; only I hope, after all that has been said and done, after all the hard things that have been *in print* about me, I do hope I am at heart *an honest man!*"

" As if anybody doubted it, John Thomas ! "

" I am afraid a good many people do doubt it, and will go on to doubt it more and more. I've been a fool—a down-right fool—that's what I've been. And now I come to think of it, I might have been a hundred times honester. I ought, at any cost, with actual ruin staring me in the face, to have got out of this hideous *phalanstery* while yet I had a name that I wasn't ashamed of. But, as I wasn't bold enough to do my duty, there's a lot of people who feel bound to do their duty by me,—and a very unpleasant duty it promises to be."

" Unpleasant indeed !" sighed Mrs. Stewart. " And I suppose we've only got to sit still and let the 'lot of people' work their cruel will upon us ? "

" They will work their will, you may depend on it ; but as for *sitting still*, I don't know what is to be gained by that. Liquidation is a long job, as I understand it ; and it is by no means a pleasant process for those who have to suffer it. It may be good for the lawyers and accountants, but I don't fancy it's much good to anybody else. I'd rather be a bankrupt, and see the worst of it at once. But I don't

understand these new business fashions ; I only understand that *we* are ruined, and have nothing in the world that is honestly our own."

"That reminds me," observed Mrs. Stewart, "that I have not had my regular house-keeping money this week, John Thomas ; and, of course, you cannot expect me to do without *that*."

"I am afraid you will have to do without it. To whom do you look for it, Mary Jane ? "

"To whom else should I look but to my own husband ? You had better let me have it at once. Things run up so quickly, and, of course, we cannot afford to go into debt; it would look so badly just now."

"That it would ; but I am afraid we should scarcely find anybody to trust us. My dear, we have but one alternative —we must do without anything but barest necessities. The worst of it is that I took no precautions, I made no provision, as some of my colleagues have done, and, after all, I am glad that I did not. But I have only a few pounds in the world, and here we are, mother and father, and six children."

"And shall we really get no money out of the North Tyburnian Company ? "

"Not a penny more, to the best of my discrimination. We had no claim upon all the pennies we have already appropriated. And, as you know, my dear, we were foolish enough—you and I—to put everything, all our old savings, all our modest but safe investments, into this too-promising vortex that has engulfed everything."

"But surely there is the balance—your *private* balance at your banker's ? Why, you let me see your bank-book only the other day ; it is scarcely three months ago, I am positive. And though I don't exactly remember what the balance was, I know it ran to *four* figures that represented a very handsome sum. We shall not be so very badly off with that as a reserve ; and, surely, better days will dawn."

"Let us trust they may. But don't you understand, Mary Jane, that all that will be counted as *assets* ? I have no private balance ; no anything that is any longer at my own disposal. It will simplify matters very much if you,

my dear—and you girls, all of you—will understand that you are just as poor as church mice, and must look out for yourselves if you want to be fed and clothed respectably."

The girls stood speechless and looked at each other. Mrs. Stewart declared herself too broken-hearted for tears ; at the same time she privately assured herself that things could not be so bad as they were represented. John Thomas, perhaps, thought it was prudent to make the worst of it ; but she could not believe that she had been living all this while in an Aladdin's palace that had suddenly vanished as completely as if it had never been. Her daughters had quicker perceptions, and Sarah Anne, who had read many a sad story of worldly ruin wrought by the collapse of speculation, perfectly comprehended the situation. Carrie cried, in rather sulky fashion, and whispered to Bella that she supposed those wicked creatures papa called the creditors would, at least, leave them the best piano.

A great deal was said, both by the elders and by the young people, but nothing was determined on, chiefly because Mrs. Stewart persisted in expressing her indignation at the bare idea of any initiative step being taken ; while at the same time, she was compelled to own that, willing or not willing, there must be a very decided and speedy retrenchment ; and she could not perceive that what she herself refused to undertake would most probably be undertaken for her, and that without any reference to her approval. And so it came to pass that three weeks were over before the heads of the household came to a mutual understanding. Mr. Stewart's family did not see much of him either at this time ; he went forth early in the morning, after a hurried breakfast, and came back late at night, fagged and tired, and looking very much as if in the interval he had been subjected to the tortures of the rack. Most of the servants had dismissed themselves, and Mary Jane and Sarah Anne, after conferring together, had decided that it would be only prudent to shut up the drawing-room, and let the outside world see that at least they had no objection to diminish expenses.

One afternoon, as they sat dismally taking an early cup of tea in what had hitherto been known as the

housekeeper's room, they were somewhat disturbed by hearing heavy footsteps in the dining-room overhead ; something was going on evidently that had not been arranged for either by the mistress or by the young ladies. Cook was gone, and the upper-housemaid also was gone, nor had Smithers hesitated to follow their example—in fact, only two domestics remained on the premises, and one of these was the same kindly little kitchenmaid who had seen Clare off to Moorlandshire on that summer morning that seemed now so long ago. When the tramping became so loud as to be disagreeable, Mrs. Stewart rang the bell with a view to make inquiries, and rather angrily demanded what was the meaning of the disturbance.

The girl who answered the summons was none other than Susan, the kitchenmaid, and she seemed extremely surprised at being questioned. "Oh ! don't you know, ma'am ? Why, they have been here since ten o'clock this morning, and I heard them say they should be about finished presently."

"Finishing *what* ? I have given no orders to any one. *Who* have been here since morning ?"

"Why, the men, of course, ma'am ; I let them in myself. And it's the *inventory* they are about. They'll be coming down directly, I should say."

"I don't understand," said Mrs. Stewart, uneasily ; but she did understand, and when she looked at her two eldest daughters she perceived that the presence of the unwelcome strangers was no mystery to them.

Mary Jane came immediately to the front, telling Susan she might go. At the same moment Caroline, who had not been seen in the basement story since the informal meal which the family called "luncheon" had been taken, came down from the upper regions and burst into a wild passion of tears. Both her elder sisters chid her for her want of self-control, and Mary Jane bade her leave off crying and blubbering in that silly fashion ; it was no worse for her than for them, and the sooner they all got out of it the better.

"Whatever do you mean ?" sobbed Mrs. Stewart, with, however, a very strong suspicion of what might not improbably be the case. "What have we to get out of ?"

"This house, mother. The time has arrived when nothing in it is ours even in name. We all knew what was coming, and so did you. But both Sally and I made up our minds not to say anything till the last moment. I spoke to the 'man in possession' before he had been half-an-hour in the house. There is nothing to be done."

"Nothing to be done? And what is to become of *us*?"

"That must be settled between father and you without loss of time, only we need not go to-night. I have been talking to the man, and he says we can stop on for a few days longer, *if we like*, and he'll try and make it as little unpleasant as he can. But if I'd my will, I'd go before it gets dark; I'd not sleep in the house again. Carrie, it is of no earthly use making all that fuss; we've been doing our very best to spare mother, and you are making it as bad for her as you possibly can. We've packed all our own things—all that father said we could lay any claim to."

"But I think we should at least have the *piano*. How am I to practise without a piano? We've *three*, you know, and they are all down in that horrid thing the man calls his Inventory."

"We *had* three pianos, Carrie, but we have not one now. Father thinks *I* might lay claim to the one in the back drawing room, for it was bought for me when I left Miss Pinkerton's for good, and it has always been called *mine*. Besides, it has been in the house at least four years, and poor father believes that he was solvent at that time."

"Then may we keep anything that he bought and paid for three or four years ago?"

"No; don't you understand? What was given to me as a present is my own, and I am of age, and I have a legal right to my own property. But father said I had better let things take their course, at present; it may be arranged afterwards, he thinks. The best we can do now is to be quiet, and not to *clamour*—that was what Mr. Westbury advised, I know; and Mr. Westbury is a great authority in such matters. It is his business to give good advice to *bankrupts*, keep them out of scrapes. Never mind the piano; if that was all, we need not concern ourselves so very much."

And now Mrs. Stewart began to bestir herself, and to declare that she neither would nor could stay another night in the house, polluted as it was by the "minions of the law." All along, ever since the day that it had been explained to her how matters really stood, she had steadily refused to face the inevitable. Something must turn up, sooner or later, she told her much harassed husband, when he tried to impress upon her the stern necessity for speedy action, and she had put off from day to day the step which had to be taken. Mary Jane and Sarah Anne had done their best to make up for their mother's passivity. They had packed all their own clothes and personal effects, and hers as well ; Carrie had been half-coaxed and half scolded into doing her part ; and even Bella, "little Bella" as she was still called among them, had made herself useful, and helped with the preparations that were being made for the impending family exodus.

But the girls had not gone so far as to secure a shelter for their heads, albeit they would soon be shelterless ; and their father was quite unable to transact any business that was unconnected with the wretched "North Tyburnian Building Company (Limited)." He had day after day to face exasperated creditors in the person of deluded shareholders who had lost their all, and had in their turn to meet the horrors of insolvency. He had to writhe under merciless examinations, and to prepare elaborate balance-sheets which were to criminate himself ; he had to bear with the best grace he could the wholesale accusations brought against him by an angry and unreasonable public ; it was *he* who had robbed the widow and the orphan ; *he* who had beggared the luckless spinster who was rash enough to have speculated in the defunct company. It was upon *him* that fell all the obloquy and execration that resulted from the crash. Or at least, so it seemed, when for the first time he awoke to the cruelty of tongues let loose, and passions awakened by the sense of irretrievable loss and bitter disappointment.

Little time had he to spend in the service of his own family, and when he came home that evening, with aching head and heart, his very senses distracted, and his nerves irritated by all that he had undergone throughout the long,

wearied day, he felt very much as if the last straw had been laid upon the breaking back of the overtired, proverbial camel. And when his wife wrung her hands, and Carrie bemoaned herself, and even Polly and Sally lifted up their voices and wept, the unhappy man felt that he could bear no more, and he exclaimed, "Would to God my niece, Clare Darlington, were here! *She* would think of something to do! *She* would not content herself with sitting still and crying her eyes out. *She* had the common-sense, the mother-wit, which all my own girls seem to lack."

"Ah! where is Clare?" sobbed Mrs. Stewart. "But it does not matter where she is. She would not put out her little finger, if by so doing she could lift this load from off us, and it is our own fault. We '*cut*' Clare Darlington in her bitter need; and now, she will '*cut*' us, and small blame to her either. Shall I ever forget that horrible bazaar, and Clare's court-courtesy; her, 'I have not the honour of your acquaintance, madam'?"

"Never mind the bazaar, mother," cried Mary Jane; "we all got paid out that day, I know. But I do wish I could take counsel with her now, for she was so much cleverer than we are, or ever were; and as Lady Forest's adopted daughter she would be rich, and she could help us—*perhaps*."

"As if she would! We gave her to understand that we parted for ever; and she would be a goose indeed if, now she has got the upper hand—by no one knows how much—she did not take us at our word; and, somehow, I'd rather humble myself to a street-sweeper than I would to Clare Darlington. She'd talk of heaping coals of fire upon our heads; perhaps—perhaps she would *patronise* us."

"I wish some one would take it into their heads to patronise us," said Sarah Anne, dejectedly. "I never thought I should ever come to wish for patronage; but one sees things so differently in the day of trouble. Oh, if there ever should come a time when I can honestly lift up my head, and not be ashamed of my name, I'll be a little more humble than I used to be when Clare Darlington was among us. We treated her most unkindly, and now it's her turn to triumph."

"Clare would never triumph in the way you mean," interposed Mr. Stewart, "not she. It was not in her to trample on a fallen foe ; she's made of the stuff that returns good for evil, unless I am much mistaken. But her position may be changed now ; I saw that same Lady Forest's death in an old evening's paper. Clare may be no better off now than she was when we packed her off into Moorlandshire with so little ceremony."

"When did Lady Forest die ?"

"That is more than I can tell you, for the newspaper was an out-of-date one, and was in course of being torn up in Mr. Westbury's office. It might have been taken out of the waste basket—I dare say it was. It did not strike me at the time. I was too much taken up with my own worries to think of connecting the deceased lady with my niece, Clare Darlington, till suddenly it flashed across my mind—as things will sometimes, quite uncalled-for—that the Lady Forest you talked about as being at the bazaar, must be the same person whose name I came across in the stray newspaper I picked up not an hour ago."

"I don't see that Lady Forest's death makes any difference to us. Only, it is just possible that Clare has gone back to those people at the Mill, and she may never hear of the trouble that has come upon us."

"It matters very little whether she do or not," remarked Mrs. Stewart, "for though she may hear, she will never heed. Why should she concern herself about *us*? We as good as washed our hands of her when we gave her to understand that her visit here had been unduly protracted, and that she must go at once, with all her goods and chattels, and leave nothing behind her. I remember how I insisted upon her taking *everything* away, even to her books and her mineral cabinets ; and she quite understood that we never wanted to see her face again. Besides, I don't see how she could help us, supposing she had the will ; unless, indeed, that lady has left her a fortune, which is not very likely."

"Clare was a woman of resources," said Mr. Stewart ; "and I am tired of being the headpiece for you all. It is my firm belief that she would have been a comfort to us, if

you girls and your mother had not taken such a foolish spite against her.”

“ Well, we were aggravated—you cannot say we were not, John Thomas ; and even *you* raved about her grace and beauty, and vowed that our Mary Jane was not fit to hold a candle to her.”

“ Which I wasn’t,” responded Mary Jane; “ I have learned to know myself since those days. Now that I have come to know how it feels to be poor and friendless, I wish I had acted very differently.”

“ Oh ! ” sighed Mr. Stewart, “ we are all wishing that, I fancy ; I little thought how soon it would come to my own girls’ turn to be poor and friendless. And they can’t say, as she could, ‘ my face is my fortune, sir ! ’ ”

CHAPTER XLIV.

“ Look unto those they call unfortunate,
And, closer viewed, you’ll find they are unwise.”

“ I TELL you what it is, girls,” said Mary Jane, junior, to her sisters, when they were all gathered together that night in the pretty room that had been for the last two or three years the *boudoir* of the eldest Misses Stewart ; “ I tell you what it is, we must bestir ourselves, and do *something*, unless we mean to be turned into the streets with all the odds and ends we are allowed to call our own. Mother will never do much more than cry and lament, and wonder what on earth is to become of us ; and as for poor father, he has got enough on his hands to hold his own head above water, and keep these hungry, angry creditors at bay. So I propose that to-morrow morning we set to work and find some kind of decent shelter. We must go into lodgings.”

“ I suppose we must,” sighed Sarah Anne ; “ there is

nothing else left to do that I can see ; there are some very nice ones in Upper Brook Street—if they are still unlet ; the Cavendish-Smiths had them, you know, last winter, and they were extremely comfortable, and the woman of the house was quite respectable. We might see if the rooms are unoccupied ; I dare say they are at this time of the year. If they are not, there is another place I know of in a street that goes out of Harley Street."

" My dear, rooms in Brook Street or going out of Harley Street are quite as much out of our reach as apartments in Windsor Castle or Buckingham Palace. Why, the Cavendish-Smiths paid twelve guineas a week for the accommodation they had ; and where they expended pounds we shall have to make shift with shillings. No, we must explore in a very different direction. We must live in a poor neighbourhood, and where things are *cheap*. I have a tolerably vivid recollection of the way we used to live in those old days that I can just remember, when you and I were little bits of things, Sally, and one of us had to mind the baby while the other went to school. We are poorer now, I fancy, than we ever were then."

" Where shall you go to look for lodgings ? "

" Susan tells me of some clean, respectable apartments that she knows of in Euston Road. I shall set off to-morrow morning and look at them and make terms, *if I can*. Father says, though, I must not go beyond twenty-five shillings a week."

" Twenty-five shillings a week ! He must be crazy to think of such a thing. We cannot possibly do with less than two sitting-rooms and four or five bedrooms. But men never can be made to understand the price and value of things."

" It is of no use going beyond our actual resources. I shall go to-morrow morning, and take Bella with me, and see what I can do ; for we cannot stop here much longer, and the air of this house chokes me now I know it isn't our own any longer, and we may be told to take ourselves off at any minute. If you have any better plan to propose—one at all feasible, that is—you may tell me, Sarah Anne."

But Sarah Anne could only feebly respond that she had

no head for business, and that she wished some good angel would come to the rescue, and carry them all right away to California, or to some other place where gold could be picked up in the streets. As for existing in one or two poky rooms in the Euston Road, it was too horrible to contemplate ; and if she had only a few pounds of her own to fall back upon, she would go to some nice, quiet seaside hotel, and stop snugly there till all the trouble should be over.

“ You are talking like a child,” replied Mary Jane, angrily. “ Bella has twice as much sense as you and Carrie have ; it must be that you *won’t* understand ; for the veriest simpleton can see that where there’s no money you can spend none.”

And truly Mary Jane, junior, was the only one of the Misses Stewart who appeared to be endowed with the merest common-sense. They were told that the family was ruined, and they could not deny the ugly fact ; but for all that they obstinately refused to accept the fact, *as a fact*, and they either would not or could not comprehend the situation in which they were placed. It was impossible that *they* could be placed on a level with poor unhappy creatures who were reduced to living in shabby lodgings, on scanty fare, and without the means of buying presentable, if not costly raiment.

The morning came, and Mary Jane was as good as her word. After a hurried breakfast, she and Bella set forth, while Sarah Anne and Carry remained at home, and bewailed their lamentable condition. Mr. Stewart was off to Mr. Westbury’s office almost before it was light ; Mrs. Stewart drank her cup of tea in bed, and it was reported that she “ mingled her drink with her tears,” when she was informed that there was no such comestible as broiled kidneys to be had—nor likely to be had, since the butcher politely, but firmly, declined to continue to serve No. 27, Kilmarnock Gardens with that vulgar but nevertheless indispensable article of food commonly known as “ meat.” Not that she cared so much, as she informed her daughters, for a meagre breakfast ; but it showed unmistakably “ what a dreadful pass they had come to ! ”

As it did, indeed. For credit there was none, and ready

money was getting lamentably scarce. Neither Sarah Anne nor Caroline had any appetite ; still, they discoursed very much in the vein of the French princess, who marvelled that poor people should resign themselves to starvation for the mere lack of bread when *cake* was so very much nicer !

Poor girls ! hard times had come upon them all. Mary Jane and little Bella, starting out in the raw November morning, felt themselves painfully depressed when they observed, for the first time, the large conspicuous posters on the outer walls, giving due notice of the approaching sale of Mr. Stewart's household effects. A very few days, and those nicely-furnished rooms and noble halls on which they had prided themselves so long would be dismantled. Nor would any friend, as far as they knew, step forward to "buy in," on their behalf, even barest necessities.

The morning passed wearily away. Caroline and Sarah Anne, under the keen-eyed supervision of the vigilant "man in possession," packed up the residue of their portable property, and were presently informed by Susan that "the sale of the furniture was placarded all about ; and that the bills quite filled up the drawing-room and dining-room windows." Moreover, Susan began to think that it was high time she herself thought of arranging for her departure ; since it would be highly improper, not to say disreputable, to stay in the house alone with the "bailey," while the prospect of "wages" was becoming hourly more and more visionary.

"I don't know why it is," quoth Susan, addressing her young ladies, as they tearfully contemplated their preparations ; "but this morning do make me remember that other morning when poor Miss Clare went away with her luggage, just as if she was a-going out into the wide, wide world to seek her fortune. Only that morning was a fine summer morning, and the sun was shining by four o'clock, and this is dark, and cold, and foggy, and the sun never have showed his face to-day. She didn't want to go, but she had to, hadn't she, now ? And it's come round to your turn, now, Miss Sarah Anne and Miss Caroline ; who would have thought it, then ? Things do go up and down in this here world, don't they, now ? It is very queer how I keep on

thinking and thinking about that morning, that was more nor a twelvemonth ago, ain’t it now, Miss Sarah Anne?”

“It shows how your wits go wool-gathering without rhyme or reason,” replied the young lady, with no little acrimony; “Miss Darlington may thank her good luck at being safe out of all this sea of worry and trouble. I don’t see why November should remind you of Midsummer.”

“Nor I neither, miss, only somehow it *do*. Ah, what a pretty creature she was! I dare say she’s married to a *lord* by this time, as keeps his carriage and four, and has millions of money. She was fit to be a princess, I’m sure, and yet she drove away in a hackney-cab, just as if she was nobody better than myself.

“Look out, miss! there’s ever such a fine carriage at the door this very moment, and there’s Miss Darlington stepping out—leastways, the footman’s handing of her out; and she’s all in crape and bugles, and the footman’s in mourning too, and so is the coachman, and the horses, for they are all in jet black harness.”

Sarah Anne Stewart obeyed her handmaiden’s injunction to “look for herself” without loss of time. And, sure enough, there was Clare, giving directions apparently to her servant, and regarding the windows which displayed the cruelly-conspicuous “Notice of Sale.” Sarah Anne turned very white as she beheld thus unexpectedly her once-despised kinswoman, and she drew her breath as though she had sustained a sudden shock. Caroline, who had rushed after her sister, beheld also, and uttered a shriek so piercing that Mrs. Stewart frantically rang the bell to inquire what could be the matter.

Meanwhile the door-bell rang loudly, and the man in possession, who seemed willing enough to make himself generally useful, obeyed the summons promptly. Clare was on the topmost step—at that threshold which she had had little idea of ever passing again. She perceived at the first glance that the personage who acted as hall-porter was no servant of the house. Nevertheless, he took off his hat and bowed deferentially enough to the occupant of the handsome carriage, which he felt quite positive was no vulgar hired vehicle.

"Is Mr. Stewart still living here?" asked the lady, in so sweet a voice that the man-in-possession declared afterwards to Susan that it was "as good, if not better, than singing."

"Yes, he is," the man answered, civilly; "but he ain't in just at present; he is very seldom at home now—if you may call it *home*, which it isn't exactly. You'll find him in Basing-hall-street to-day, I'm thinking."

"But are the family still here?"

"Most of them, I reckon, though they will be off in a few days at the farthest. You may see for yourself, my lady, that there's to be an *auction* no later than next Tuesday week."

"Can I see Mrs. or Miss Stewart?"

At that moment Susan came running down the well-remembered stairs. "Oh, Miss Darlington," she cried, "how glad I am to see you again! and how pleased they will all be to get a sight of you once more! I'm sure you're a sight for *sair een*, as I've heard the Scotch people say. Come in, come in!" Clare turned mechanically into the familiar dining-room, and started back at its unwonted aspect. In the grate were the remains of last week's fire; the furniture was oddly arranged, and on the broad, smooth sideboard was chalked the inscription, "Lot 223." There could be no manner of doubt as to what was impending at No. 27, Kilmarnock Gardens.

"You see, Miss Clare," said Susan, apologetically, "we've left off using these here rooms, for there's only me to keep things tidy, and I've more than enough to do to fetch and carry and run on errands. Would you mind going upstairs into the school-room? There's a nice fire there, and the young ladies mostly keep there now a days. Mistress is in bed, and is but poorly."

Clare followed Susan to the third floor, thinking, as she went, of the morning when she had last descended those stairs, and of the solitary Sunday she had passed for the most part in that silent school-room. On the landing stood Sarah Anne, very untidily dressed, and with the traces of tears on her round, rosy cheeks. What sort of reception would be accorded to her Clare found it impossible to guess, for Sarah Anne frowned as she met her cousin's

kindly glance, and Caroline looked stupider and more solid than usual.

“Well, you see, I have come back to you, cousins,” was Miss Darlington’s accost, as she extended her hand. “I did not hear of the trouble you were in till yesterday, or I should have been here before, you may be sure. Where are all the others?”

Clare’s voice trembled as she spoke, for she was greatly agitated, and, as we know, she was rather of an excitable temperament; and it was not without a stringent sense of duty that she had resolved on seeking out these helpless relations of hers—on the very ground where she had once shaken off, so to speak, the dust of her feet against them, as a testimony that she renounced, once and for ever, every Stewart of them all. For response, Sarah Anne burst into a flood of tears, and Caroline was not slow to follow suit.

“Oh, Clare,” was all that Sarah Anne could sob out, “we are so miserable, and we have not a friend in the world! Ah, you have your revenge now; we are brought low, indeed! It is your turn to triumph now, Clare Darlington!”

“I am not thinking of triumph, I assure you,” replied Clare, softly; “and all the revenge I want to take is to help you, if I can. And you have a friend in the world while I am in it; I am not quite so poor as I used to be, and I have the will as well as the power to be a comfort to you.”

“God bless you!” cried Sarah Anne, hysterically; “you must be a real Christian, else you would never forget and forgive after all our shameful usage of you. But is it true? —will you really be kind to us, instead of rejoicing over us in our day of adversity?”

“I will really do all I can for you, though there may be some things in which I am powerless to help. Mr. Bellingham—my lawyer—thinks Uncle Stewart has been imprudent, and not otherwise; but he says he is paying heavily for the sins of others; society is making a sort of scapegoat of him.”

“That it is, that it is, indeed. Poor father never meant to cheat and defraud people, as he seems to have done. Of course, he was legally responsible for what that wicked Building Company did; but he never tried to embezzle and be a thief, like some of the directors have done. We’ve

given up everything ; and I'm sure I don't know how we are to live at all respectably."

" What are you going to do when you leave this house ? "

" That is more than I can tell you ; you don't know how difficult it is to make up your mind to anything when you've got really empty pockets."

" I think I know something about 'empty pockets' ; nothing hampers one more than a lack of means."

" Ah, but you always had a kind of income. Fifty pounds a-year is better than no income at all. And—is that beautiful carriage your own ? "

" Yes, it is ; and so are the horses and the servants."

" Your very own ?—your *private property* ? "

" My very own. They were left to me by will ; nearly all Lady Forest's money has come to me."

" Then you must be a rich woman—a very rich woman, Clare Darlington ! and I must say Providence is a little unfair. Everybody extols your beauty—and it will be extolled more than ever now you are a great heiress ; it's a shame that any woman should have a face like yours, and heaps of money, too. If your face is your fortune, as the old song says, where's the need of your having a fortune at the bank ? I do not think too much ought to fall to the share of any one person ; and I hope you'll see it to be your *duty* to put out both your hands and help your own kith and kin to a goodly share of the fortune that has fallen to yourself."

" We will talk about all that presently. You may depend upon it, my own 'kith and kin' shall profit by my good fortune ; only, Sarah Anne, it is difficult quite to forget how you, and your sisters and your mother, once told me, in the drawing-room below, that I was never to think of presuming on my relationship to the Stewarts any more. You all washed your hands of me, you know ; and left me to sink or to swim, as should betide."

" Well, we *were* a little hasty, I dare say ; but we always knew that you would fall on your feet ; for you were pretty, and clever, and more used to society than we were. Besides, you were not absolutely *destitute*, as we are now ; anyhow, you've got a fine opportunity to do the generous thing by us.

You can pay all papa's debts, you know, and set him quite straight again."

But that was the very thing Clare had no intention of doing. She had had a little conversation with Mr. Bellingham that morning, and he had cautioned her against making herself generally responsible. "For," said he, "that company is more deeply involved than you can even guess; and to risk any portion of your fortune in it is simply to fling it into the fathomless sea. All your newly-acquired wealth would be swallowed up, and no one would be essentially benefited. No; if you help these friends of yours, you must help them as individuals, and have nothing at all to do with their *liabilities*. And I beg you to take no decisive step without first consulting me, or some other man of the world who knows what law and justice is."

And Clare had promised not to pledge herself to any course, but only to help her impecunious relatives to help themselves, and to come between them and actual privation. She might do a great deal for them without at all staking her credit. She was thinking what best she could reply to Sarah Anne's very modest suggestion, so as not to convey an unkind impression, and at the same time not to awaken delusive expectations, when Mary Jane and Bella appeared upon the scene.

They had been apprised by Susan of the recent arrival, therefore they were not quite as much astonished as might have been the case had they received no intimation of Miss Darlington's presence. But explanations naturally ensued, and Clare soon found that her eldest cousin was far more reasonable than her sister Sarah Anne, and was fully conscious how little either she or hers merited the kindly aid that was liberally proffered. *She* was only too thankful to accept gratefully the assistance that Clare was so willing to give.

And presently Mrs. Stewart came into the room, anxious to know in what sort of spirit Clare had paid her visit; for, as she was compelled to own to herself, *she* should "never have troubled herself about people who had acted as they had done, and as good as turned her out of the house." Moreover, she wanted very much to know what Mary Jane

had been able to do, and whether she had managed to secure anything like a decent shelter for her all but homeless family. And further explanations were made of far humbler tone and complexion than those already tendered by Sarah Anne ; but almost as incoherent and inconsequential, and, as a matter of course, almost as incomprehensible.

It transpired presently that Mary Jane had seen some rooms that "would do," provided the landlady and Mr. Stewart could agree as to terms. The "apartments" were not spacious, certainly, and, though furnished comfortably, were very far from luxurious. They were fairly situated in the Euston Road, and presented various advantages which rendered them highly desirable—especially to people in the Stewart's plight. They were really very reasonable ; being clean and airy, and as quiet as could be expected in such a noisy thoroughfare, just a little withdrawn from the high road.

"And I think, mother," concluded Mary Jane, "that we cannot do better, if only we can manage the rent ; but it is just *twice* as much weekly as father said I might agree for. And I don't think you will say that it is dear at the price."

"What *is* the price ?" sighed Mrs. Stewart. "Oh ! that *I* should ever come to have to calculate to a few shillings how much I can afford to pay !"

It very soon appeared that fifty shillings a week was the price demanded, and that for *three pounds* two extra rooms could be secured, and everybody made "quite comfortable," according to Mary Jane's assurance.

"Oh, if that is all," interposed Clare, "don't hesitate a moment. I will gladly be responsible for three pounds a week, or even for a little more. Only, girls, don't you think Mr. and Mrs. Stewart had better see the rooms first, before you come to a final decision ? And those good people in the Euston Road will certainly require some sort of reference, or else a week's payment in advance."



CHAPTER XLV.

THE EXODUS OF THE STEWARTS.

"Let the dead Past bury its dead."

THE discussion ended in a proposal made by Clare that Mrs. Stewart and one of her daughters should immediately drive with her to Euston Road, and straightway inspect the "lodgings" of which Mary Jane thought so favourably. Mrs. Stewart at once accepted the offer, and she and Sarah Anne lost no time in preparing for the journey, for the day was already so far advanced as to admit of little delay, if the rooms in question were to be viewed before nightfall.

"Ah, this *is* delightful," sighed the elder lady, as she deposited her substantial form on the soft, yielding cushions ; "this is a much handsomer carriage than ours ; now, isn't it, Sarah Anne ? But I suppose I must not talk about *our* carriage any longer ; for my husband says we have not one, and in all probability shall never again own any kind of equipage—unless it be a wheelbarrow, or at the best, a donkey-cart—till the day of our deaths. And me getting in years, too ; it is terrible to think of ! I hope you will let me have the use of yours pretty often, Clare, my dear."

Miss Darlington made no reply, and Mrs. Stewart went on—"Your poor uncle was wishing for you only last night, Clare. He always was so proud of your cleverness and tact, and he was quite sure that if you knew of the trouble and perplexity we were in, you would soon come quickly to the rescue. And it *is* so delightful to see your face once more, my dear ; why have you never written to us, Clare ?"

"Do you wish me to tell you the real reason ?"

"Why, yes, of course," was Mrs. Stewart's nervous and hesitating reply. She had no sooner asked the question than she wished she had refrained her lips, for it might not be exactly pleasant should Clare take it into her head to speak the plain, unvarnished truth. Too well she knew *why*

the correspondence referred to had been a total blank ; and before her niece could make any rejoinder, she added uneasily, "To be sure, *I* never wrote to *you* ; but then, you know, I am no scribe, and inditing a letter is always a troublesome affair to me, seeing that my education was most dreadfully neglected when I was young. I dare say it would not be so much to you to write a book as it is to me to issue half-a-dozen invitations ? "

"Probably not," was the answer. "So much depends upon habit."

"Just so," was the response ; "but, Clare, it grieves me to hear you speak in that cold and reserved tone. I am sure if I and my poor girls offended you in any way while you were our inmate—and I am fain to confess we didn't take to each other quite as kindly as we might have done—I am very sorry, and I hope you'll overlook all that is past, and let bygones be bygones. 'Forget and forgive' was always your poor mother's maxim, I have heard your uncle say many a time. Shall we agree to bury the past, and have done with it, my dear ? "

"Mrs. Stewart," said Clare, very gently, "I am quite ready to condone the past, bitter as it is to me even in memory. I will do my best to help you through your trouble. I will show you every kindness, and I will try, as far as I can, to *forget* the cruelty I suffered at your hands. But I must say, before we for ever dismiss the subject, that I think you treated me very hardly. Doubtless there was something to forgive on your side also ; still, you might have shown a little generosity towards the solitary and friendless orphan. I was alone in the world—that ought to have pleaded for me a little, surely. You turned me from your doors, you loaded me with insult—you did not even condescend to bid me adieu, when we parted, as you apparently desired, *for ever*. During those last painful days you showed me but little mercy, Mrs. Stewart."

"My dear !" answered the lady, "now don't—*don't!* I was very fond of you, indeed I was ; and if you hadn't come across my Mary Jane there would have been no ill blood between us, anyhow. But, you know, you *did* take away her sweetheart."

"No, I did not ; for the Hon. Mr. Delany never was Miss Stewart's *prétendu*—that is to say, her avowed lover. I am sorry that he preferred me—for he was a young man by no means to my taste, a mere brainless aristocratic fop. I have seen him and spoken with him since those days at St. Wilfrid's, and my opinion of him is unchanged. But do not let us disagree about Mr. Delany—he is not, he never was, worth it ; and I sincerely hope Mary Jane is reserved for some one very much his superior. And now that I have said all that I have to say, let the subject be dismissed. Henceforth, let us be friends, and try to make each other comfortable—if not happy."

Mrs. Stewart "wept a little weep," and would have tendered all sorts of abject apologies, but she had perception enough to understand that she had better not prolong a disagreeable subject, and one that Clare was obviously more than willing to waive. So she kissed her niece—perhaps a little too affectionately—and Sarah Anne, who had maintained a sullen silence throughout, then and there comprehended that the hatchet was to be buried between all parties ; and the less said the better. Clare returned the salute with a warm and sincere pressure of the hand, and began to talk about the unpleasantness of a winter in town. Mrs. Stewart returned to the consideration of her own embarrassments and deplorable losses in a lengthy jeremiad. Neither Clare nor Sarah Anne were at all sorry when the carriage arrived at a certain house in the Euston Road, and the number proclaimed it to be that at which they were expected to alight.

The landlady was a Mrs. Goldsmith, and she was evidently not disinclined to treat with Miss Darlington, who at once put herself forward as spokeswoman ; and, finally, it was settled that Mr. and Mrs. Stewart and family should come into possession the next day, in the evening, Miss Darlington giving her own name and her banker's by way of reference, and at the same time guaranteeing the regular payment of the rent—weekly, and in advance.

"I suppose we ought to be very much obliged to Clare," said Sarah Anne, as they sat drinking tea in the underground parlour at home, almost for the last time ; "but I

must say I had rather be under obligations to anybody else. She *must* be triumphing over us in her heart."

"Well, so long as she does not show her triumph, we need not trouble ourselves about that one scrap," replied her mother. "I can only say I felt ashamed when I remembered some of the things I said to her in the old time. Little I dreamt that I should ever come down in the world, and that she would be the one to pick me up ! It's very hard lines, girls, I know, but we may learn a lesson, I think ; it doesn't do to trample on people because they are poor and needy, for one may come to grief oneself, and want a friend to lend a helping hand. I am sorry now I wasn't kinder to Clare when she was with us. Her forgiveness and generosity have humbled me a thousand times more than her pride and haughtiness did that day at the bazaar. I shan't be satisfied till I have begged her pardon and acknowledged my trespasses against her. It breaks one down this returning good for evil !"

"That indeed it does," responded Mary Jane. "I've been thinking, since you and Sarah Anne have been gone, mother, how shamefully *I* behaved to her. I don't think you or any one else would have been so nasty and spiteful towards her if it had not been for me. I was envious and jealous, that's what I was. I took a dislike to her the same evening that father brought her home to us. I regarded her as my rival, and as soon as I saw that Mr. Delany admired her, I began to hate her. Yes, *hate* is the word !—it was nothing less than that, and she must have turned *very* good to be able to show any kindness to me who showed her all possible unkindness. I left no stone unturned to get her out of the house—I didn't even tell the truth about her always—I made her out to be a great deal more haughty and contemptuous than she ever really was, and I accused her of *scheming*, which was altogether a slander, and quite unmerited, for I could bring nothing against her, except the bare fact that Percival Delany admired and grew to adore her, to my infinite exasperation. And she couldn't help being so pretty and charming, and having that sweet, silvery voice that he was always commending. I shall tell Clare this, and beg her forgiveness."

"More silly you!" cried Sarah Anne, angrily, "I thought you had more spirit, Polly—more proper pride than to humble yourself to one who was once your inferior, and now rejoices in being superior to us all. Why, of course she despises you, and I feel as if I could despise you, too, and mother as well, for knocking under to her, like a couple of naughty, cowardly children that are afraid of getting punished. I daresay father will follow suit, and fall down and worship the rising sun. For my part, I hate her, and I don't care who knows it."

"Oh, Sally," put in little Bella, "how can you?—and when she is so kind to us, and never did us any harm! As Polly says, she could not help being so very pretty."

"Pretty or ugly, it's all the same to me," said Sally, viciously; "and I'll thank you to keep your opinions to yourself, miss; I am not going to take shrimp-sauce from a chit like you. If all the rest of the family are weak enough to crawl in the dust, I am not going to follow their example. And I can't bear the idea of taking money or money's worth from *her*. I've a great mind to go out to service, and earn my own bread and cheese, without being beholden to anybody. For you'll all turn against me now, I expect, because I am too proud to humble myself to a person whose only credit it is that she has fallen upon luck."

"What is all this about going out to service, and who is it that Sally declines to humble herself to?" asked a deep voice behind. It was that of Mr. Stewart, who had returned home quite two hours before he was expected, and had entered the room unperceived by anybody save his wife. Of course, everybody—his second daughter excepted—was eager to communicate the news, and so anxious was everyone to explain fully, that there was no little confusion in the poor man's mind; and, finally, he was obliged to command silence while Mary Jane alone told the whole story from beginning to end.

"No more than I should have expected!" he cried, wiping his eyes when his daughter had concluded, and all questions had been duly answered. "She's poor dear Fanny's own child, and so she has a heart of gold! I'll never be persuaded to do the unmanly part again; and I've

felt like the coward that I was ever since I let that poor child go out of the house, friendless and alone, with all but an empty purse. But God has watched over her and brought her to honour, while I have come to shame and ruin, and dare scarcely show my face. And oh, children, don't let us quarrel and upbraid each other!—let us have peace and concord in our midst, whatever else we may lack! Sarah Anne will think better of it presently, and she will feel grateful, like the rest of us, though I don't know that she is wrong in thinking of going to service. Honest wage for honest work is never to be despised; and I beg, Mary Jane, you won't put any more nonsense into these poor children's heads. They've nothing but their own hands and brains left to them, and if they have common-sense, not to say worldly wisdom, they will make the best of what they have, and ask God's blessing on their labour."

"But to be common servants or shop-girls? Oh, Mr. Stewart, I couldn't live and know that my dear daughters were in *kitchens*, when their rightful place is in drawing-rooms. And it would be very nearly as bad to think of them behind a counter; ladies go shopping, but they never serve in shops —no, *never*."

"My dear, do not talk rubbish; neither you nor I thought it any disgrace to stand behind a counter once upon a time. I only hope the girls may have the good fortune to secure respectable situations of some sort or other, and I trust most sincerely that it will never be cast up to them that they are *my* daughters. It will go against them, being who they are, for the name of Stewart stinks in the nostrils of all honest-minded people at this very moment. So, Sally, if you can get a good place, either in kitchen or shop, so much the better for you."

"Very well," replied Sally, sullenly; "the sooner I am on my own responsibility the better I shall be pleased. Of course, I shall detest washing dishes and scrubbing floors; but if I can do nothing better, I'd rather do that than be beholden to Clare Darlington for daily meat and drink, and a bed to lie on. At the first surprise I did not feel it so much; but, as we drove along in her grand carriage, drawn by *her* fine horses, and *her* stylish footman handing us in

and out, I felt that I simply detested her, and the very sound of her mincing little words almost made me frantic. And then mother and Polly flattering and caressing, and saying they're *thankful*—ugh! it makes me sick!"

"Sarah Anne," said her father sternly, "I'm well-nigh as much ashamed of you as I am of myself, and that's no little, I can tell you. I have nothing else to say—you have my full and free permission to go and drudge whenever and wherever you please, for I am afraid your society will yield us little else than discomfort."

But, indeed, it was not very easy to discover for what sort of work Sarah Anne Stewart was fit. She had learned nothing well, and her temper was naturally bad and ungoverned. She was clearly one of those who have no alternative but to get their bread by the sweat of their brow, provided they get it at all. She could do nothing better than *drudge*—she was not clever with her needle, and, though not unskilful at figures, her waspish temper and sharp tongue incapacitated her for the duties of shopwoman, while one specimen of her disobliging manners would have been enough to disgust the most forbearing and sanguine of employers.

No; in her heart Sarah Anne felt that by toil alone could she hope to become independent. She went away to her bedroom, and lay down, for the last time, on the pretty canopied couch she had called her own ever since the removal of the Stewarts to North Tyburnia. And she sobbed herself to sleep, poor girl, and dreamed of the thrice happy days when luxury and good-fortune were hers, and Clare Darlington was the luckless one who had to be lectured, and reprimanded, and taught to demean herself as became an unpopular poor relation. She was really very much to be pitied, for she refused to take the comfort that might still have been hers, and she turned with all the angry perversity of her disposition from the little gleam of happiness that the rest enjoyed in the contemplation of unexpected succour.

Mr. and Mrs. Stewart and their other daughters sat till midnight discussing their prospects. Those of the head of the family were dismal enough—himself, personally, his

wealthy niece could not help ; he must bear the burden of his dread responsibility—he must pay the price of his own rash folly—the penalty of his too-credulous adventure ; and what that penalty might be he did not, as yet, know. And Mr. Westbury had, that day, grimly assured him that the law *might* take its course, and that the world, perhaps, would think less vindictively of him, and regard his family with less disfavour if he decided to put a few thousand miles of ocean between himself and his unappeasably angry creditors.

“Sally may be cross,” said Mary Jane, after a long silence, “and she has enough to make her cross, no doubt ; but it’s neither wise nor prudent to set herself against the only person who has been so generous as to come to our relief. Still, she is right in determining to get her own living—we must all do that—we ought not to be dependent upon Clare for all the necessaries of life.”

“Certainly not,” replied her father. “If the *best* happens, I am afraid I shall not be able to do more than just keep myself and your mother, and, perhaps, little Bella till she is old enough to fend for herself. We must all work.”

“I can do something,” interposed Bella ; “I could soon learn a business, and I know Cousin Clare will not grudge paying a good premium to have me properly taught. I have heard that Heaven helps those that help themselves ; and I believe it. I am afraid I could not teach, for I know but very little myself ; I always put off applying myself to my studies till I went to a boarding-school, and now it’s too late. But I rather think I should like to be a milliner. It’s quite a respectable trade, isn’t it, mother ?”

“I used to think it so once, child,” replied Mrs. Stewart ; “and as we shall never hold up our heads in society any more, it doesn’t so much matter as to the gentility of it. You’ve a pretty taste with flowers and ribbons—you take after me in that respect, Bella. Still, I never thought I should live to see one of my children *apprenticed to a trade.*”

“Let us be thankful that it is in our power to secure a means of livelihood to the child,” interrupted Mr. Stewart. “As for ‘society,’ we will make up our minds to do without it. We did very well, Mary Jane, my dear, when we lived

quietly in South Lambeth, and never troubled ourselves about what was fashionable or genteel. I would to God I were in my own old shop again, not owing a penny, and able to defy the world ; paying my way as I went, and having a nice little nest-egg in reserve, and something put by against a rainy day. And what do you mean to do for yourselves, Polly and Carrie ? ”

“ Oh, I mean to give music-lessons,” replied Carrie, jauntily ; “ I think I shall rather enjoy it. I have always been complimented on my touch, and told how very well I play. I’d just as lief turn my music to account as not.”

There was no one present to throw cold water on the young lady’s laudable ambition, or she might have been not unreasonably reminded that she was deficient in theoretical knowledge, that she played too often out of time if not out of tune ; while her performances were so violently *fortissimo* as to drive persons with sensitive ears to the other side of the room. She was fond of a noise, and was partial to octaves and resounding chords, priding herself in no small degree on the dexterity with which she achieved a double chromatic scale from one end of the key-board to the other. Little Bella was naughty enough to say that it sounded very much like one quarrelsome *cat* running after another. But, on the whole, Caroline Stewart’s music was highly considered by both her parents, and, as an amateur, she met with no small commendation from her friends ; the poor girl had not a notion of being severely criticised just because her accomplishments were regarded as accomplishments no more, but simply as “ her stock in trade.”

Mary Jane said, modestly, she was not qualified to give music lessons, or to teach any foreign language ; but she fancied she could undertake the tuition of little girls of ten or twelve—at any rate, she could consult Clare, whose education had been so much better than her own.

Next day was devoted to a final packing-up, and Clare came herself to superintend the family exodus from Kilmarnock Gardens. It was some little consolation to Mrs. Stewart that she drove to her new home in her niece’s well-appointed carriage, and not in any common hired conveyance. Sarah Anne was thankful that the roomy *landau*

would not hold them all; that she and her sisters were expected to go in the several four-wheel cabs that were chartered for the conveyance of themselves and their private property to Euston Road.

CHAPTER XLVI.

PERPLEXITIES.

“Though some men do as do they would,
Let others do as do they should.”

MISS VANDERQUIST had left Lowndes Square by this time, but her journey to Chalkshire being temporarily deferred, she and Clare could still meet almost daily, and discuss the various subjects of conversation that from time to time presented themselves. The Stewarts had been settled in their Euston Road lodgings for more than a fortnight; but the affairs of the “North Tyburnian Building Company” were still in inextricable and hopeless confusion, and each day as it succeeded another seemed but to reveal fresh deficiencies and growing embarrassments.

Christmas was now approaching, and Clare was debating where she should spend the festive season—having strong desires towards the banks of the still much-beloved Allan Water, when Mr. Bellingham, with whom she was frequently conferring, intimated that it would be most undesirable for her, under existing circumstances, to leave her London residence, so much important business still requiring her continued presence in town. “But so little can be done so long as the holidays last,” urged Miss Darlington. “Why should I not take my pleasure as well as other people? I do not care if some matters are left unsettled for a little while longer, and my departure from the Abbey Mill was so very sudden.”

“It was, indeed,” replied the lawyer, with a grim smile

referring to the escape on the night of the inundation ; "nothing could have been much more abrupt or informal, I suppose. May not your desire be gratified without your going into the country ? Why should not your good friends visit you in London ?"

"I have thought of that, but I am very much afraid they will not be persuaded to quit their home at present. They, too, have a great deal to attend to ; there is the old Mill House to be restored to habitable condition, you know, and they are naturally anxious to lose noti me about it."

"Of course they are, but let me remind you that the same causes which suspend actual business in town, must operate also in Moorlandshire. Nothing of any importance can be effected till Christmas is well over. Mr. Darlington can make his arrangements and lay his plans here, quite as easily as in the north. All things considered, I am quite sure that the wiser plan would be for them to come to Lowndes Square as your guests. They, too, must need a holiday, I am sure, and if they do not enjoy a week or two in town they must be made of the most impracticable materials. Take my advice, Miss Darlington, stay in your own house, and keep Christmas by your own fireside."

That afternoon, when Miss Vanderquist came across the Park to drink her five o'clock tea with her friend, she found Clare evidently a little perturbed in her mind, and she at once inquired what was the matter.

"Well, to tell the truth, I am just a little worried," said Clare, as she thoughtfully stirred her tea. "I have always prided myself on knowing my own mind, and now I do not know it, and I am consequently feeling rather unsettled and uneasy."

"I hope those troublesome Tyburnian cousins of yours are not giving you any trouble ?"

"No ; the Tyburnian cousins are guiltless just now. I am disappointed, Dolly, and, I am afraid, almost cross ; you know I quite meant to go back to Moorlandshire on the same day you started for Chilling Towers ?"

"I know you did, and why should you not carry out your plan ?"

"Because Mr. Bellingham thinks it is not quite in the

fitness of things that I should absent myself from my own house at this juncture ; and I can see that to a certain extent he is right, for there is still a respectable amount of legal business to be transacted, and he is absurdly anxious to free himself from his responsibilities without delay. Mr. Bellingham is a very good man, and as kind and courteous as he is good, but he is just the least bit fussy, and he likes his own way."

"But you are your own executor ?"

"Of course I am, and Sir Francis kindly consents to act for me if I find myself in any sort of perplexity ; but I have other embarrassments, and I feel as if some of these might be best avoided by my temporary return to the old home. Otherwise I should prefer my cousins coming here ; it seems to me that it would be so much easier and nicer if I began the new life with them at Duston."

"Surely you have discussed the subject with Mr. Warner already ? It will be very much as he wishes, I suppose ?"

"Dolly, that is the whole source of my uncertainty ; he will not tell me what he wishes. He writes to me just as Ralph or Dick might write ; his letters are the letters of a true and faithful friend, but *not* those of a betrothed husband. He has not said so much, but I could fancy that he is construing this fortune of mine into a barrier between us—a something which alters our relations, and renders null and void the promises we have made to each other. Now, if I go to him he must listen to what I have to say ; if I ask him to come to me, he may, perhaps, excuse himself. What would you do if it were your own situation, Dorothea ?"

"It is very difficult to judge for another person, even for your own intimate and confidential friend, but I think—mind, I only say *I think*, for I am not extremely wise, I am afraid—I would take Mr. Bellingham's advice. It is certainly good that you should remain on the spot, and whatever Mr. Warner may feel or fancy, it is quite as certainly in the fitness of things that he should come to you rather than you should go to him. Then you have, to a certain extent, the Tyburnian cousins, or rather the Eustonian cousins on your hands, and you are not very well

satisfied with your present servants, especially the house-keeper and the butler, of whom, I must confess, I have serious doubts myself. Altogether, in this inevitable transition state of your concerns I do think your duty, just for the present, is *here*. Your wealth has its responsibilities, remember."

"Yes, I know; but I had counted so much, so very much, upon going home this week or next. I cannot help it, but I feel as if a good deal depended upon it."

"My dear, you are your own best adviser, and you have every right to follow your inclinations, so I will not endeavour to persuade you one way or the other. Suspense is always painful; but a rash decision, a wilful determination to have one's own way, is sometimes a little dangerous. Clare, cannot you leave this perplexity where you have left so many others?—cannot you ask to have all your doings, your goings out and your comings in, *ordered* for you? I would leave it to God, if I were you. He will show you the way wherein it is expedient that you should walk."

"But this is such a trifle. I seem merely to myself to lack determination."

"I do not think anything in this life is a trifle; nothing in God's world is a mere chance, it appears to me. If a sparrow does not fall to the ground without *His* will, surely we may depend upon Him for the guidance of our most trivial human affairs."

"You are right, Dolly; nothing can be trivial in His sight—so trivial that it may not be trusted to Him. I will not decide to-night; I will put off my letters till to-morrow morning; I need wisdom, so I will ask for it. It is good for me to waver for a few hours longer."

And when next morning came Clare's indecision had quite vanished. One or two slight circumstances had shown her that her place just now *was* by her own fireside, and long before the regular hour for luncheon, the letters were written that were to summon her dearest friend and her relatives to her side. And when she had despatched these letters to the post, she did not torment herself with fears that she had, perhaps, done unwisely; she tried not to be anxious at all, but to leave the issues in the hands of God. Nevertheless,

she did feel some apprehension when, on the Monday morning—the earliest post by which she could receive an answer to her request—the letters from Duston were put upon her breakfast table. She had given the invitation to all ; and all would willingly accept it, save the two young men, Dick and Ralph, who could not prudently absent themselves during the next few weeks—the Mill, as well as the Mill House, being under rather critical repairs. The miller himself wrote, and excused his sons ; but his wife and he would joyfully respond to the summons, as would also their three daughters, to whom the visit would be a rare and delightful treat. As for Philip, he must speak for himself.

It was with no little trepidation that Clare opened the remaining letter, addressed in Philip's clear, well-known handwriting. Yes, he would come ; he was longing to see Clare ; and as it seemed impossible for her just now to join the family circle, the next best thing was certainly for the meeting to take place in Lowndes Square. Still, there was a coolness in the tone, a certain formality in the style of the epistle that struck a decided chill to Clare's heart. She could not exactly find fault with the letter, it was kindly and even affectionate ; but it was not a lover's letter. There was undoubtedly something on Philip's mind. Well ! if he was finding out that he had made a mistake, if he *repented*, it had better be now than later in the day ; perhaps, after all, it might be "ordered" that she, as well as Dorothea Vanderquist, was to live a solitary life.

But now she had abundant occupation in preparing for her visitors, who, however, would not be due till the Thursday, which was also Christmas-eve. And then it struck her —she wondered that the idea had not occurred before—that Charles Anderson must be asked to meet her cousins on Christmas-day ; she would lose no time, but drive at once to the Beaufort Manse, where Edith's lover was to be found. Fortunately, he was at home, and his sister likewise, for Margaret had recently come up from the country to get her brother's household into order. Of course, she must accompany Charlie to Lowndes Square.

"Can you not stay and send back the carriage ?" said Miss Anderson, when they had all talked for nearly an hour.

"We will have tea almost directly if you will remain ; we have no stable, of course, but there is a place, not a hundred yards hence, where you may put up your horses in safety ; it is quite too chilly to keep them standing any longer ; and it seems such a pity to terminate our conversation, or to send you away without a cup of tea."

And Clare owned that she felt extremely comfortable where she was, and that it would be quite as well to take this opportunity of giving her coachman a lesson ; for he had somehow imbibed the notion that the carriage, as well as the horses, was very much at his own disposal, and could only be had out, or kept out, save with his approbation. He drove away, looking extremely surprised, but not daring to remonstrate ; after all, Miss Darlington *was* his mistress, and the whole concern was hers, and she could dispense with his services at any moment. And it occurred to him, not by any means for the first time, that he had a very comfortable place ; also, that it was a decided advantage to have no master poking about the coach-house and stables, making sure that the hay and corn were not improperly administered, and looking with a keen eye after the weekly accounts. The animals he drove were "sacred beasts," in his eyes, and he preferred to be their high-priest without any interference. Miss Darlington was already innocently surprised at the immense quantity of food the favoured creatures consumed ; and she was a little puzzled at the great quantity of sponges, wash-leather, mops, and brushes that were constantly required in the stable-yard. She could not but acknowledge to herself that it would be a great comfort to have a *master* at the head of her establishment ; for she was no Woman's Rights' young woman, and she had no wish to exercise to the full the privileges and authority vested in her own person.

The Andersons and Clare enjoyed their twilight chat amazingly, and before the carriage came back it was arranged that Margaret and Charles should be at Lowndes Square on the coming Thursday in time to receive the expected guests, who were not to be too late for dinner.

"And with a little packing we could accommodate you both," said Clare, as she was preparing to depart ; "it could

be quite easily arranged. It will be delightful to have such a houseful, and so much pleasanter not to have to break-up towards midnight ; so I shall expect you to remain from Thursday afternoon till—when shall I say, Mr. Anderson ? for I am forgetting your Sunday duties. I suppose it would not do for you to take a little holiday ? ”

“ Not just yet, I am sure ; I could scarcely desert my own pulpit so soon after being called to it. I must, at the latest, return here on Saturday evening. I think I can manage to make the needful preparations for Sunday before Thursday, and I can excuse myself for Christmas-day, when our organist purposes entertaining the congregation with a little musical performance and a special service of song ; a friend in the neighbourhood will, I know, be happy to preside.”

It was decidedly pleasant to have plenty to do, and plently to think about, Clara reflected, as she drove back to her own house ; and why had she not sought out the Andersons before ? That question was easily answered ; she had really been most fully occupied in one way or another ever since her arrival in town. First Lady Forest’s death, then the funeral, and the innumerable claims upon her attention resulting therefrom, had so taken up her time that she had actually no leisure to employ in looking after friends or neighbours ; while they, on their part, were scarcely intimate enough to venture on what *might* possibly be deemed an intrusion at such a season. Then had come the episode of the Stewarts and their demands on her personally, leaving but scant opportunity for thought of anything else.

For Clare had not contented herself with simply opening her purse, or making vague promises ; and she had not rested till she had seen her hapless cousins as comfortably established in their lodgings as it was possible for them, under their peculiar circumstances, to be. She had taken care that sundry articles of luxury should be superadded to the somewhat scanty plenishing of the good Mrs. Goldsmith. A couple of comfortable arm-chairs and an easy lounge, had been placed in the formal and not too cheerful-looking drawing-room ; the bedrooms, too, received certain additions ; and as Clare had insisted on the whole house being secured, except that part of it which was occupied by the landlord

and landlady and their two staid, comely daughters, it followed that the Stewarts would not be annoyed by the presence of fellow-lodgers. Finally, Miss Darlington had taken care to hire a really excellent pianoforte for the use of her cousin Caroline, who made a bitter moan over the loss of her own favourite instrument ; and she at once began to practise so perseveringly—and we must confess so noisily—that the whole family of the Goldsmiths was confounded ; and the next-door neighbours sent in angry messages declaring that their peace was invaded from early morning till midnight, and that unless the nuisance was abated they must, however reluctant, “take proceedings.”

It was on the day before Christmas-eve that Clare be-thought herself that it would be only kind if she paid her cousins a visit, and assured herself that they had really all things that were essential to their comfort ; especially at a season when most people expect a little extra enjoyment. The idea struck her, and was moreover very much impressed upon her mind, as during the morning she was occupied consulting with her housekeeper and inspecting her own resources prior to the influx of arriving visitors. And she astounded the deferential butler by actually descending into her own cellar and demanding a list of the wines, which had been furnished, as she very well knew, by Mr. Weller on his retirement from office, early in the preceding summer. Of course it was not forthcoming.

There was a terrible deficiency, too, in some other departments ; and the housekeeper, who had also constituted herself cook during Lady Forest’s last illness, was almost struck dumb when Miss Darlington made certain inquiries, and mentioned the dreadful fact that she had ordered the tradesmen’s books to be sent in to *herself*, and that she would at once, with the housekeeper’s assistance, make out a list of the articles that were necessary ; at the same time, mildly but emphatically reprimanding her servant for the great deficiency in the general stores. There was something urgently wanted in nearly every department of the household commissariat, and to-morrow would be *Christmas-eve* ! Clare blamed herself that she had not looked into her own affairs a few days earlier ; but the use of her ordinary faculties

informed her that she was being plundered to no ordinary extent, and she had no fancy for being made prey of in this fashion, and thereby encouraging unscrupulous fraud and dishonesty.

The result was that, after partaking of a luncheon, for which she had not the least appetite, Miss Darlington called for her carriage and drove out to give her own orders ; and *Fortnum and Mason* were desired to fill a hamper, or hampers, immediately with various comestibles supposed to be in most request about Christmas time, and despatch them by their next delivery to Mrs. Stewart, at a certain address given there and then. Afterwards, Clare gave further orders for the plenishing of the larder in the Euston Road, as well as her own ; and she made sundry purchases, which were at once packed and put into the carriage. Finally, she drove to the house in the busy and not too fashionable thoroughfare which was, for the present, the abode of her unfortunate cousins—late of Kilmarnock Gardens.

CHAPTER XLVII.

LA ROSE DE PERONNE.

“ Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast.”

C LARE had scarcely alighted from her carriage when, above all the tumult of cabs and omnibuses, she heard the loud reverberations of the grand piano which she herself had caused to be placed in Mrs. Stewart’s drawing-room. Carrie was hard at work practising her scales most vigorously, with her foot well down upon the forte pedal ; she had announced her intention of spending at least eight hours a-day in the prosecution of her musical studies, and she had evidently not the slightest idea of sparing the nerves of anybody within hearing of her powerful instrument.

Miss Darlington lingered in the narrow passage, generally

dignified by the name of "hall," while the contents of her carriage were being unloaded, and she wondered how the inmates of the house preserved their senses if Carrie's performances were always in the same demonstrative style. As she ascended the stairs the noise naturally increased, and on the landing the uproar was so great that it was little wonder no one heard Miss Goldsmith's modest tap at the room door. So it came to pass that Clare was actually in the midst of her cousins before her presence was at all perceived.

"Dear me, Clare," was Mrs. Stewart's salutation, "whoever would have thought of seeing you at such a time of the afternoon! But it gets dark so early in this wretched, dismal neighbourhood, where the sun scarcely ever shines; and I believe there is a regular winter fog coming on—we have nothing *but* fogs and wind in Euston Road, I think; and we never had them in dear old Kilmarnock Gardens. I dare say the parks are quite bright even now, and Lowndes Square is all sunshine?"

"Lowndes Square is dismal enough on a foggy day," replied Clare, good humouredly; "and I could scarcely see my way before me in the Park as I drove across to the Marble Arch. But would Carrie mind leaving off playing for a little while; for I find it rather difficult to hear or to make myself heard?"

"Indeed, I don't wonder," exclaimed Mrs. Stewart; "she makes as much row as a whole orchestra. I tell her that loud crashing noise was never thought much of in my young days."

"It's thought nothing at all of *now*," interrupted Sarah Anne; "she will never succeed in securing a single pupil if she plays in that outrageous fashion. Classical music is all the go *now*, but she won't believe me; and I do wish, Cousin Clare, you had got us a nice little *pianette*, soft and sweet, that wouldn't disturb anybody."

"I am striving to perfect myself in my profession," said Carrie solemnly, suddenly ceasing her scales, and facing round towards the company, "and this is the way I am constantly annoyed. I tell them nothing but regular, unceasing practice enables one to become a genuine musician. How shall I ever be able to give lessons—finishing lessons

too—unless I attain to a faultless and brilliant execution? And you know yourself, Cousin Clare, how indispensable are *scales* and *exercises*."

"But neither scales nor exercises need be practised with the pedal down," Clara found courage to say: "suppose you studied the *pianissimo* style a little, Carrie; *expression*, rather than noise, is, I assure you, principally considered in the present day; and the pedals are, on the whole, very little used."

"So much the worse for the performers!" retorted Carrie disdainfully. "What's the use of a first-rate instrument if you are not able to bring out its full tones? And to my mind there is nothing like *execution*. Madame Arabella Goddard would be unrivalled in her profession could she but be persuaded to keep down the *forte* pedal a great deal more."

"I do think you are making a great mistake," said Clare mildly; "the prevailing style to-day is anything but noisy—of course there are *forte*, and even *fortissimo* passages, and sometimes these require the pedal; but the old thundering, crashing, scrambling style is entirely gone out; that is left to the street pianos. If I were you, Carrie, I would renounce the use of the loud pedal for a little while."

"I wish she would," sighed Mary Jane, who had not yet spoken. "I have been half wild with toothache ever since I left our comfortable home in North Tyburnia; and what with the rattle of the traffic outside and the rumble of the 'underground' beneath, and the strum and crash of Carrie's everlasting practising, and the horrid pain—I expect I shall go demented, and have to go to Bedlam or somewhere else where they take in pauper lunatics."

"Seriously, Carrie, it must be very trying to endure the disturbance," and Clare was beginning an expostulation, but Carrie burst into passionate tears, and loudly lamented the selfish persecution to which she was subjected by all her family. Even the chits, Victoria and Adelaide, just home from their Brighton boarding-school, had presumed to criticise her performances, and had not scrupled to declare that they should pity any unfortunate girl who was luckless enough to engage *her* as music mistress.

"And it is hard—very hard," sobbed Carrie, "that I cannot pursue my career. I love my glorious Art, and I am devoted to it, heart and soul. I am quite ready to relinquish everything else in its favour. In plain words, Cousin Clare, I cannot and will not be dependent upon *you* or anybody else. I wish to relieve my father of the burden of my maintenance, and surely *that* is a commendable sentiment. And in what other way can I accomplish my plans of independence save by my musical talents? I am very often tired to death of strumming, and I dare say they are tired of hearing me; but if I don't mind the labour, I think they should not mind the slight inconvenience of being disturbed in their frivolous reading or idle chatter."

"Whether we mind it or not," interposed Mrs. Stewart, "we shall be turned out of the house, for our landlady and her daughters say they cannot bear it much longer; and as for the notes and messages we have had from the neighbours, making all sorts of rude complaints, and threatening to indict poor Mrs. Goldsmith for 'harbouring a nuisance,' they are past count, Clare Darlington. I wish you would go to the music-warehouse, and tell them to take back the dreadful thing."

"You could never be so spitefully cruel!" exclaimed Carrie. "Ma, I am downright ashamed of you! She and my sisters—nasty venomous things! want to take away the bread out of my mouth, Cousin Clare. Do tell them that I *must* practise—that I cannot get my living if I am deprived of my dear piano. Why, I bless you fifty times a day for letting me have it. I think of you every time I play my scales; and for those invaluable *études de vélocité* I can never thank you enough."

"Carrie," replied Clare steadily, "I am afraid I have made a great mistake. I do assure you I had no idea that the piano was such a powerful one when I chose it for you. I heard it in the street, above all the uproar of the traffic; and I must confess nothing can justify you in sacrificing the comfort of your entire family, and annoying your neighbours, in the vain pursuit of what you imagine to be musical proficiency."

"The *vain* pursuit? Oh, Cousin Clare, how *can* you be so unkind?"

"I do not mean to be unkind, Carrie, far from it; but I am afraid, in encouraging you to go on practising, I have done a piece of mischief which it behoves me, so far as is possible, to undo. You throw away the time that might be more profitably employed; you vex and torment all about you, and gain nothing yourself."

"Cousin, some one has been prejudicing you against my music; but you shall judge for yourself. I will play you my last new piece, and you will have to acknowledge how much I have gained in brilliant execution since I really devoted myself to musical study. I attribute all my improvement to those very scales and studies that ma and sisters despise so much, because they are not pretty tunes or common lively jigs."

And without any further preamble, poor Carrie manœuvred round on her music-stool, and at once commenced an elaborate set of variations, or, rather, a *Fantaisie Brillante* on the well-known theme of the "*Rose de Peronne*." And the *fantaisie*, well-played, is really a pleasing composition, though belonging to a school of music long since passed away. But as performed by Miss Caroline Stewart, the author's conception was simply *murdered*; and her auditors—especially the one she most earnestly hoped to impress favourably—were put to the torture so long as the whole noisy, scrambling performance lasted. And Carrie spared them not one bar of the lengthy composition, though we are sorry to say she missed a great many notes, and struck a great many false ones too. The first chords were given with a force that threatened to demolish the much-enduring instrument; and the rapid double chromatic scale, with which the introduction terminated, was so much like the pursuit of one infuriated cat after another that it was next to impossible to suppress a smile. Happily or unhappily Caroline, who had her back turned to the audience, remained sublimely unconscious of any sign of adverse criticism, and she went gaily on from *maestoso* and *moderato* to *brillante* and *vivace*, and finally wound up with a page of *vivacissimo*, that was more of a scramble than

aught that had preceded it, and with two loud resounding chords, that Clare felt persuaded must shake the house, and startle the nerves of casual passers-by.

"There!" exclaimed the *amateur*, when, after a prolonged vibration, the sound at last died away, "now what have you to say, Cousin Clare?"

"My dear, I am sorry to disappoint you, but for your own sake I must not deceive you. Nobody who heard you play that *Rose de Peronne* would ever consent to listen to any second performance of yours; what you have learnt, you have learnt so very ill, that it would be good for you if you had never studied anything but five-finger exercises. Don't be vexed, dear, but try to bear the truth; you can never—no never *now* become a *pianiste*—you can never give lessons; music is not your talent; you must try something else."

Of course a scene ensued, and for the rest of that evening Caroline Stewart wept herself half blind, and the much outraged pianoforte rested from its labours, to the no small content of all within the house and of the half-maddened next-door neighbours. But before she left, Clare made a proposition that met with general approbation: the younger girls were to be encouraged to practise in moderation, generally eschewing the *forte* pedal; and they were all, Carrie included, to take lessons from a professor whose judgment and teaching capacity were undoubted. Carrie would then perhaps be persuaded that she had not been unkindly criticised or injuriously treated.

But there was another difficulty to be surmounted when the subject of the musical nuisance had been fully discussed. Mrs. Stewart, as soon as opportunity occurred, began to hint, in very broad terms, that she supposed Clare was come, like "a dear good creature as she was," to invite all her relations to spend Christmas Day in Lowndes Square. Now, Clare had no such intention, and felt that she could not bring herself to gratify the expressed desire of her aunt and cousins, and so she took refuge in presenting the gifts she had brought with her; but to her mortification, though pretty and useful in the extreme, and tolerably costly, they met with but slight appreciation. Mrs. Stewar

was evidently mortified and annoyed, and seemed more than half inclined to reject the proffered good. Second thoughts, however, bade her restrain herself, and she relapsed into a half sulky kind of lamentation, in which, from time to time, she deplored the declining state of her health, and her absolute need of a temporary change of scene and air.

Sarah Anne, however, was not to be repressed, and she roundly charged her cousin with unnatural conduct, and reproached her with a meanness and selfishness in wishing to enjoy all her good things in solitude. But Clare replied that she had no intention of spending her Christmas Day alone, for her guests were already invited, and her house would be full. She could only regret that it was out of her power to accede to her relatives' request ; but she trusted the bountiful supplies she left behind her would, to some extent, reconcile them to their disappointment, while at the same time she hoped they might be induced to spend another day with her at Lowndes Square.

And having successfully controlled her rising irritation, and made, as well as she could, the *amende honorable*, she proceeded to take her departure before her powers of endurance should be any further tested. But Mary Jane and little Bella followed her downstairs into the deserted dining-room, and begged her to overlook the rudeness and ingratitude by which her favours had been met.

" Let me say how deeply thankful I am to you for all your kindness," said Miss Stewart. " When I think how little I deserve anything save neglect and contempt at your hands, Clare, I am overwhelmed with confusion. Please take no notice of what mother and Sally say, and do believe that some of us—if not all of us—feel how much we owe to your great goodness. Tell me now, do you think there is any objection to my offering myself as governess to little girls under ten or twelve years of age ? Or, might I not take a situation as humble companion ? And I should not mind making myself ' generally useful,' as the advertisements so often say. I am determined to be brave, and work for myself, for poor father will never be able to do much more for any of us. He is terribly broken down, Clare."

"Poor uncle ! I am very sorry for him, Mary Jane, and if I could do anything to lessen his misfortune, I assure you I would, but I hope you understand that in this case I am powerless. If he had become insolvent, as an individual, something might be attempted ; but, as things are, I am assured by Mr. Bellingham, who is a very sensible man as well as a good lawyer, that I might as well endeavour to mend matters by risking my own fortune as set about filling up with rubbish a fathomless abyss."

"I quite understand that, and so does father, and so does mother, when she can bring herself to look at the affair calmly. Only yesterday, when Sally was talking nonsense in her usual strain, father said to her, 'Clare has done all she possibly could, and as for making an effort to stave off the misfortune that has fallen upon *us*, by satisfying the public, who have been our dupes, she would only ruin herself without setting us on our feet again.' And though I am a very poor business woman, cousin, I can see that he is quite right. The most you can do for us is to help us to work, and to a few daily comforts. And what you could do, you have done, and are doing *nobly*."

"I am so glad you think so, and that my uncle is satisfied. Tell him that I will leave no stone unturned to help him as an individual, and he will know by this time that I mean what I say ; for by Mr. Bellingham's advice, I have made myself responsible for the best legal counsel which can be obtained. The case ought to be well watched, he said ; and he left me with the express intention of seeing Mr. Westbury, and making all due provision for what was needed."

"God bless you, Clare Darlington ; you are indeed loving your enemies. You are providing exactly what is most wanted. Mr. Westbury said that poor father's only hope of escape from consequences that I dare not contemplate lay in securing *good legal help* ; and, as it may be some time before I have another opportunity of speaking to you privately, let me say now how much—how very much—I repent of all my ill-behaviour to you two years ago. If you would just say you *forgive* me, I should feel so much lighter at heart ; and perhaps God would forgive me, and bless me, and grant me the success I am hoping for."

"With all my heart I forgive you, Mary Jane. You did not understand me, that was all ; besides, I did not behave in the most conciliatory way at Kilmarnock Gardens, I must confess. If you were 'spiteful,' as you say you were, I was proud and contemptuous. Henceforth let us be friends, and give each other credit for all good intentions."

"Thank you again and again—a thousand times. Now I have confessed my sin to you as well as to God, I shall hope to go on my way a little more happily. If, presently, I may be able to support myself in decency and honour, and if I may once more see my dear father holding up his head, and safe from the dangers that threaten him, I think I shall be a happy woman, and content to do my duty in that station of life in which it shall please Providence to place me."

"And you will try not to be hurt that I did not invite you all for Christmas Day ? For you see, my cousins from the Abbey Mill are coming, and there will be a great deal to arrange, and they would not like to find strangers present at our gathering—that is, strangers to *them*—for of course you are my own kith and kin. And they, too, have had their troubles lately, and so much will have to be discussed. Only Mr. Anderson, the pastor of the Beaufort Church, and his eldest sister, will be there to meet them, and we have none of us any secrets from them ; for I must tell you that Charles Anderson and Edith Darlington are engaged ; and I have every reason to expect that Margaret will before long become one of ourselves. And, while we are on the subject of marriages, I may as well confess that I am myself *engaged*, and hope to be married some time during the next year."

"Thank you for the confidence. I am delighted to hear it, for I am sure you have chosen wisely ; and with all my heart I wish you every possible blessing and happiness. You did rightly in keeping your Christmas party to a limited few. I shall think of you the day after to-morrow, and perhaps pray for you, for I can dare to pray now that I have humbled myself and confessed my wrong-doing."

"And I hope you will enjoy yourselves as much as

possible, seeing how great is the trial that is come upon you. I could not find it in my heart to speak of these things"—and she pointed to the still unopened hampers—"but you will discover plenty of good things for your Christmas dinner; and I can promise you and Bella a splendid dessert, for I have not forgotten how fond you used to be of almonds and raisins and candied apricot. Nor have I forgotten poor Carrie's little weakness for preserved ginger; nor your mother's *tendresse* for pistachios."

"How good you have been, cousin! you have thought of us all," said the little girl. "And you will pay my premium, will you not?"

"What premium, my dear?"

"The premium that I shall want to bind me apprentice to a first-rate milliner. I will do my best to learn my trade, I promise you, and I will make you the prettiest bonnet in the world, as soon as I know how. It is quite respectable to be a milliner, isn't it, Clare?"

"Quite, dear; and I like you all the better for choosing something to do for yourself; but you shall not be a milliner just yet; after the holidays I think you must go back to school and learn a few more lessons. But we can settle all that presently; only be sure, dear, that if any of you want money for any honest purpose, it will be forthcoming."

And then she kissed her two cousins and drove away home; and the solitary evening passed quickly and pleasantly away, while she revolved all sorts of schemes on behalf of the Stewarts, and countless plans for the benefit of those beloved ones, who would—God willing—be with her no later than the following afternoon.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL.

“ ‘Tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished.”

“THIS is simply *splendid!*” said Madeline Darlington, as she sat in her cousin’s own sitting-room on the following evening. “Clare, I had no idea there were such beautiful houses in the world, and carriages, too! Why, everybody in London must have his own carriage and horses.”

“Not quite everybody, child,” returned Clare, laughing a little at Lina’s amazed admiration; “London has its dark sides, darker and sadder than you can even imagine; and as for fine houses, you have seen but very few as yet. But tell me, what have you been doing since I left you six weeks ago? I have heard very little, and I want to know all about it.”

“We have just been going on in the usual way, and we are getting pretty well accustomed to the Home Farm; it is much more comfortable now that we have fetched so many things from the Mill House, and it reconciles us to having to remain so long away.”

“Then you do not think of returning just yet to the Abbey Mill? I asked your mother before dinner, and she gave me no very decisive answer; nothing is really settled yet, I suppose?”

“That is it; nothing is what father calls *definitively* settled; it is very much a question of money, I fancy; and the Mill itself, and the renovation of the machinery, which is almost ruined, will cost so very much. But, Clare, where will you and Philip live when you are married?”

“That is a question that we need not discuss to-night, my dear. We shall have a great deal to talk about presently; I think we will leave business till to-morrow, after dinner; what I chiefly wanted to know just now was how

you are progressing with your studies ; you had made up your mind to work hard you told me before I left you."

"Yes, and I hope I have not been very idle. I stayed on at Ormstead till a fortnight ago, and did my lessons every day with Nellie and Alice Anderson. Then I came home, and I have tried to make myself useful in the house, and in waiting on father. But, Clare, Tessie tells me that she is *not* going to be a governess after all, for *you* wish her to remain with her own family, and she thinks it will not be so very long before Charlie takes away Edith to Beaufort Manse, and then, of course, she will be wanted at home, especially if I go to school, as we were planning a little while ago."

"A great many of our plans have to be altered now, Lina dear ; but all seem so tired except yourself, and Charlie and Edith have so much to say to each other, that I think we will defer all important conversation."

And at last Philip and Clare had met again, but Clare was far from satisfied. Her lover was kind and courteous, almost *too* courteous she thought ! he was constrained and reserved in his manner, and his tone was cold ; he was altogether unlike the Philip from whom she had parted on the railway-platform at Allan Bridge.

"But I think I understand it," she said to herself, as she sat over her bedroom fire that night, "Philip is proud, and he demurs a little at the prospect of marrying *an heiress*. He scarcely realised the change at first, though I remember that in his earliest letter, after my announcement of my heiress-ship, he said he would rather I had remained poor Clare Darlington, than he might have the supreme pleasure of working for me himself. But now that he does fully understand this marvellous turn of fortune, he hesitates—I had almost said he vacillates—and we shall have to go through something like a second proposal, I see. Foolish, foolish Philip ! as if it mattered which should give or which receive, where true love—such as I know in verity ours is—binds two hearts together. And unless I perceive that you are really tired of me, Philip Warner, unless you only repent the troth we plighted in the deserted school-room in the ruined old Abbey Mill, I will not let you go. If I were a sovereign queen, you would still be my

king, and no other. Only, let me know that you do repent—through it be ever so little—and *you are free!*"

Christmas morning rose bright and clear; quite an ideal Christmas-day everybody said as greetings were interchanged; and Clare gave notice, as she presided at the breakfast-table, that she had Christmas gifts for all, only they would not be presented till after dinner; and Tessie was charged to carry the message upstairs to her father and mother, who were both too wearied to appear till a little later in the day. Lina, of course, was wild to know what her present would be, and she confided to Edith that she *hoped* it might be a pink coral necklace and pendant—Clare had heard her say, many a time, that she should always long for one, and would like nothing else half so well.

The carriage was ordered round, and Lina and Tessie, and Margaret Anderson were driven to Westminster Abbey, just in time for the morning service; Edith and Mr. Anderson wandered away into the depths of Kensington Gardens, and buried themselves in such solitudes as were attainable, not returning till luncheon was almost over. Where Philip had hidden himself no one exactly knew; but certainly he had not availed himself of a lover's prerogative to pass the morning with his betrothed, and yet she had spent several hours alone in the drawing-room, undisturbed even by the servants. When he did at length appear at luncheon, he had very little to say for himself; he seemed gloomy and dispirited, and was quite inclined to waive the inquiry that was generally made as to his whereabouts through the whole forenoon. Finally, when urged by Lina, who, as usual, could not repress her inherent spirit of curiosity, he replied to her, very gravely, "I was in the library—no, *not* reading; I had a great deal to think about."

Luncheon was over; it had been rather unduly prolonged by the tardy appearance of the wanderers, and Philip had asked to be excused, on the plea of having to finish a letter, when Clare rather startled all present by saying very quietly, but with just a little tremor in her tones; "I should like to speak to you presently, Philip; shall I find you in the library?"

"I shall be in the library," was all he ventured to reply,

as he hurried from the room ; but he changed colour more than once as he rose from the table. All present comprehended that Clare demanded a *private* interview, and Lina was on the point of inquiring what they had to say to each other, when a glance from her mother restrained her. After lingering about half-an-hour, in order that Philip might have plenty of time to finish his letter, Clare went to keep her tryst.

Philip looked up as she entered, and as the door closed their glances met.

“ Philip !”

“ Clare !”

And in that moment, every doubt and every suspicion of caprice or unfaith melted away, and they knew each other's hearts, and were at peace again. “ You have been very *naughty*, ” said Clare, presently, when she thought they had had quite enough of tender expletives and caresses for that time ; “ I will not use any stronger word, for we call very dear children ‘ naughty ’ you know ; but you have a little disappointed me by this seeming shadow of doubt. I have had to seek you, you see—that was not right ; but I was not going to be unhappy an hour longer than was inevitable.”

“ And were you unhappy—actually unhappy, my Clare ?”

“ I was ; and how was it with yourself ?”

“ Could I possibly be happy while this spell was laid on us both ? Thank God that you have had the wisdom, the true courage, the true womanliness to break it.”

“ I felt that if the ice were allowed to harden a few hours longer, it might be impossible to attempt to break it. But Philip, you hurt me a little—you have hurt me very much indeed. I thought you knew me more thoroughly. What did it matter to which of us the good fortune fell ? I would have taken from you, without a moment's misgiving, far more than you have to take from me. All mine is yours, as yours would have been mine had these unexpected riches fallen, not to my share, but to your own ; and surely you had no doubts as to my faith ? You did not think that a heap of dirty money could effect any *change* ?”

“ That I did not ; my doubts were of myself, whether I

ought to hold you to your promise, made under such different circumstances."

"My promise was to *you*, Philip, and in no wise to your position. It mattered very little to me what that was. I pledged my faith for richer or for poorer, and I should have been content to wait for years, had God so willed it, for the fulfilment of our hope."

"And so should not I, I am afraid. But there is one thing more, Clare ; I have made a discovery that even you may think ought to justify some hesitation. I have found out—in a strange, haphazard sort of way—that *my mother* is living."

"That cannot matter to us. Is she——?"

"Ask no questions, please, dearest ; she was my father's shame, and she is my disgrace. I *could not* tell you what she has become ; I will only say that she has trodden the downward way ever since she forsook the paths of righteousness, and now she is what I dare not name. If I had not spoken to you Clare on that summer evening, I don't know whether I should be justified in speaking now ; you ought to marry one who comes of a good pure stock—you ought not to link yourself with shame."

"Now, that is morbid, Philip ; this shame, if shame there be, is none of yours. You cannot in any sense be answerable for the fault of a parent whom you cannot even remember,—whom you did not even suppose to be alive. Your real mother has been Cousin Margery."

"Yes, thank God for that ; I owe more than I can ever tell to her wisdom and tenderness. I inherit, I believe, somewhat of my unhappy mother's proud, defiant spirit, and who shall say what else I may not inherit from her ? But my adopted mother has carefully trained me up in Christian principles, and I have learned from her and hers the true secret of peace. Had I been left to other and less holy influences, there is no knowing how I might have wandered from God and from His law. I am afraid I am not what you would call a very well-disposed character naturally ; you had better think twice before you join your fate with mine, for I was not born of godly parents."

"But you are a godly man yourself, Philip, or I confess

I should tremble—I should think more than twice if you were not a decided Christian, for I am quite sure that a man's true Christianity is the only safeguard on which any woman can depend ; and you have given yourself to Christ. For the rest, we will help each other, and pray for each other. But your father,—he was a good man, surely ? ”

“ I believe he was ; I would fain hope he was a Christian man, but of that I cannot be quite certain. Anyhow, he was an honourable man, though a weak one, I'm afraid ; the story of his marriage I have never reliably heard, but it must have been a most imprudent one : she a bigoted Roman Catholic by profession, and a woman of violent, unchecked passions ; he, a Protestant and a man of honour —of scrupulous honour, Cousin Margery says. There can have been very little sympathy between them.”

“ Indeed, *no*. And that must be sad indeed ; difference of religion must always tend to division between those who are nearest and dearest. But you and I are of one faith, and hold the same convictions on almost every point, I think—certainly on all those which are of primary importance.”

“ Well, dearest, you know my unhappy secret, and you are the first to whom I have imparted it. It was your right to know all about my lineage, such as it is. I have not yet told Cousin Margery ; the subject is one from which I involuntarily shrink.”

“ Thank you for your confidence. The fact of this unhappy lady's existence will have no effect upon me. Only, Philip, a mother is a mother, and if she is in any state of destitution, and if any kind influence might be brought to bear upon her—”

“ At present, dear, nothing can be done. Rely upon it, I will not fail in my duty—for it will be duty simply—should opportunity arise. She is not lacking in this world's goods, I believe. What may betide on some future occasion I cannot foretell, but in this case, as in others, sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. Now let us talk of something else.”

“ Of course, you comprehend that I undertake to find all the money that is needed to set things perfectly straight at

Duston? And I have still other claims on this fortune of mine: do you at all object?"

"How could I possibly object when I am to profit so tremendously on the whole transaction? Of course, the first object of my life, as of yours, is to reinstate Robert Darlington in his proper position. I was more than willing to secure this by the sacrifice of my own worldly pelf; but it would have taken years to effect, and it would have involved a great deal of anxiety. Now your generosity clears away every perplexity, with only a few strokes of the pen."

"It is scarcely generosity, when you consider that my whole happiness is bound up in the weal or woe of these dear people of the Abbey Mill; their welfare must be always my welfare. When they are blessed I am blessed, when they are troubled I am troubled. Do you not think, Philip, you had better take me as a partner, not only for life, but for the whole concern? Had not the business better be carried on for the future under the names of 'Darlington and Warner'? Shall we not go on to make common cause together in everything?"

"By which you really mean, shall we not all 'share and share alike,' or something of the sort, in the great wealth that has fallen to the lot of Clare Darlington alone?"

"If you choose to put it in that way."

"But Lady Forest meant this noble inheritance for her kinswoman, not for others, about whose prosperity she was by no means solicitous. I am not sure that she would approve of her cherished riches going to endow anything so plebeian as a flour-mill and farm."

"Poor Cousin Forest knows better now, I would fain hope, and she made not the slightest stipulation in her most unlooked-for *will*, neither did she say any word to me which might have hampered my future arrangements. I am carrying out to the full, and beyond, all the provisions that were included in that will. As for the rest, I am free in honour and conscience, as well as in law, to dispose of my income exactly as it pleases me. And I wanted to talk it all over with you, Philip, that after dinner, when we come to actual business, I might refer my cousins to you as my representative;

feeling quite sure that you would willingly save me the trouble of making explanations which, I am afraid, might not be altogether lucid if left to myself. I want you to act for me ; I want to throw on you all the responsibility. I am not so much a woman of business as Lady Forest's heiress ought to be, I am afraid ; and when I succeeded in grasping the astounding fact of my large inheritance, I assure you it was an immense relief to me—an infinite comfort, to reflect that I was an engaged young woman, and had a right to look to my affianced husband for a guide and helper, as to one who would legitimately share my every difficulty. And, Philip, I know you will not disappoint me."

" I will try to be a comfort and a blessing to you through life, my dearest one. I should never have sought an heiress for my wife, I am convinced, but somehow my love has been transformed into an heiress. I should certainly never have married for money, that most detestable of all bargains. But it so happened that, without in the least guessing it, I followed the advice of the good Quaker who, while counselling his son not to marry for money, advised him to go where there *was* money,—and plenty of it too."

" I have always been so thankful that we came to an understanding just precisely when we did. I was no heiress when I promised to be your wife,—if we had waited a few hours longer, it might have been that you would *never* have asked me ; and I should have lost you through an inheritance that would not have been much happiness to me, unless shared by you."

" It is quite upon the cards that I should not have presumed to address the *rich* Miss Darlington ; still, you know I had already declared myself, and been repulsed."

" I know. But I told you then that I had no sooner fallen into error than I regretted it ; you could scarcely expect me to make a fuller confession, I think, sir. Perhaps, —I only say *perhaps* ; I don't know, but I *might* have forgotten my maidenly dignity so far as to give you the most delicate hint in the world that you *might* venture on your fate once again. However, I am glad, and always shall be, to remember how we settled it all, that frosty November morning, on the banks of our beloved River Allan, before

there could be any excuse for shyness or reserve on either side. It was all brought to pass, Philip ; God took our lives into His hands, and gave us the one to the other. At least, I am so happy as to think that was it."

"And I trust I shall never give you any reason to doubt that Divine interposition. When we are very old people—if God spares our lives so long, my darling—I hope we shall look back upon that day as the day above all others when He, from whom all rich gifts come, bestowed upon each heart its richest earthly blessing. Now, must you go away? Yes, it must be getting on for dinner-time, so I ought not to detain you ; you will want a little quiet time before we all meet together."

"Just one word !—will Cousin Robert be vexed in the least if I hint at anything like his retirement from downright active business ?"

"That he will not, as you will put it. Uncle has never been quite the same since his terrible accident ; and the strain which has been upon him as regards pecuniary affairs, nearly ever since, has not helped to restore him to his former vigour. I tell him that he has, in point of fact, *three* sons, and not one of them an idler or a simpleton ; so he may well banish all personal anxiety, and take his ease for the rest of his days. That might have been advice impossible for him to follow just yet ; but now that *you* come to the help of us all, with your money-bags, my lady-fair, every lurking care may be dispelled, and the miller of the old Abbey Mill may take his rest and cease from his life of toil, as much or as little as he shall please. There, I believe that is the first bell ; dinner is earlier to-day, is it not ?"

"Yes, one hour earlier, to suit the convenience of the servants ; and, Philip, here is my Christmas present—the others will have theirs presently. I think I shall always regard it as a sort of duplicate betrothal ring ; and you are always to wear it, recollect, in memory of this morning, which is really our second betrothal day."

"It" was a fine old cameo ring, an antique, set with the finest brilliants, and Philip could wear it, if he chose, as his own signet-ring.

C H A P T E R X L I X.

THE FAMILY COUNCIL.

"And through the long years liker shall they grow."

IT was a quietly happy family party that assembled on that Christmas Day round the solid, old mahogany, about which the deceased Sir Raymond and his lady-wife had been wont to entertain their friends in times gone by. And, considering that Miss Darlington was comparatively new to the responsible duties of hostess, and not too well supported by the staff of domestics at present in her service, she certainly succeeded in giving a splendid entertainment, and in imparting to all and each of her guests unqualified satisfaction. And it was a source of no small content to herself that her unfortunate cousins in the Euston Road were likewise, on their own account, partaking of her hospitality.

When at length the table was cleared, and only the dessert remained, the promised Christmas gifts were formally presented, and Madeline was made the happiest of the happy by receiving, not only the pink coral necklace and pendant she had so long coveted, but a whole set of ornaments of the same description, and much more beautifully carved and mounted than she had ventured even to imagine. Philip exhibited his costly ring, at the same time remarking that he only had been favoured with a private presentation.

Edith had a handsome mosaic; and Tessie just the exquisite little gold watch and substantial chain that she had often wished she might possess, and which she quite intended to purchase for herself whenever "her ship came home." Charles Anderson had a valuable set of books for his private library—a goodly row of volumes, richly bound, and just those, as he informed his betrothed, he had been meaning to add to his collection as soon as he could spare the cash; although he had never dreamed of acquiring them in nearly such expensive bindings. Margaret

received an exquisite Florentine brooch, richly set in gold, and large pearls, "a veritable gem of price."

"And now I must make the present that it pleases me above all others to make," continued Clare when all the pretty things had been duly admired. "I have reserved for the last your gift, Cousin Robert and Cousin Margery. There! that parchment is all that I have to offer you, though I have a ring besides, as a little keepsake for you, Cousin Margery; but the parchment is by far the most valuable. It is a sort of '*Instrument*,' as Mr. Bellingham calls it, which he has drawn up himself, so that no mistakes may be made, and which Philip knows all about; and it conveys to you in proper legal form a certain sum of money, quite enough to cover all the expenses caused by the flood, and to replenish for the present the family exchequer. And there are other propositions which Philip will make to you by-and-by, when we adjourn to the drawing room."

Mr. Darlington was deeply moved, for he was no longer the manly, robust miller of a few short months ago; he had sustained a terrible shock from which he would probably never entirely recover, and his health had become, of late, the source of great anxiety to his wife. As the effect of the injuries passed away, the nervous system still remained weak and shattered, and the countless worries which had arisen, as losses seemed to accumulate, had not tended to restore the physical powers of earlier days.

"I have been a faithless creature!" he said, when he had somewhat regained composure, though the tears still gathered in his eyes. "I have lamented my losses as though they had come upon me by chance, rather than by the will of a kind and all-wise Father; and I have said, like old Jacob, 'all these things are against me.' My dear, I accept your gift with all the gratitude I can express; but I take it as coming more immediately from Him in whose hands are all the treasures of the earth. I shall go to bed to-night without a single care for the future; except that I shall strive for a more thankful heart, and pray that henceforth I may learn to trust every burden to the Lord."

"If you knew the intense joy I have had in making this disposition of a part only of my large inheritance, you would

think that I had the greatest cause for thankfulness. I never, till now, fully understood how infinitely more blessed it is to give than to receive. And, dear cousins—both of you and every one of you—I can never forget that ‘I was a stranger, and ye took me in.’”

“Dear child, if we did that which was pleasing to the Lord, we are overwhelmingly rewarded. For when we took in the stranger—who was not actually a stranger but our own kith and kin—we entertained an angel unawares.”

“There was very little of the *angel* in the stranger whom you welcomed within your gates, I am afraid,” said Clare, smiling through her happy tears. “If there was the least bit of good in me, it was you who developed it, dear cousins; and so long as life lasts I shall feel that I owe much more to you, as in God’s sight, than I owe to the generosity of her who, so short a time ago, was the mistress of this house; though I am not disposed to undervalue the accession of worldly wealth that, through her, has accrued to me.”

“I think we had better adjourn to the drawing-room, and ring for some coffee, before we attack any more of the business that lies before us,” interrupted Philip, who saw that his aunt was anxious for her invalid husband. And all rose with alacrity, and the move was made, the gentlemen straightway accompanying the ladies. And there, round the blazing fire, other subjects were discussed; and the project of some of Clare’s money being invested in the firm which had so nearly come to grief, and which was on the point of being newly constituted, was most favourably received, as, indeed, it well might be.

“Only,” continued Mr. Darlington, when the conversation seemed coming to a pause for lack of further need of argument, “after all, Clare, you will not be the rich woman your cousin designed you to be, for a good deal of your principal will be necessarily locked up, if not indeed actually risked.”

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affluence in all my life ; even after I have risked and expended a few more thousands, I shall have such abundance as I could never have hoped to enjoy ; I have been so poor a woman that a rather limited income would be wealth to me. As it is, I shall have more than plenty for all my needs, and I shall be blessed with the most exquisite of all luxuries—the luxury of not being stinted in the means of doing good. But now there is one other thing I really meant to consult you about ; and on this head I have not had Philip's opinion."

"Well, my dear, what else ? We seem to have settled a great many weighty matters since we finished dinner."

"But there is one more that presses rather heavily upon me, and it concerns my cousins, the Stewarts, upon whom, as you well know, terrible misfortune has fallen. What is their true claim upon me ? What ought I to do for them, so as best to serve them, and lift them up from the quagmire into which they have descended ? "

"I am afraid, from all I have learned of their very peculiar situation, it will require a stronger power than yours, my dear, if not a more generous will, to extricate them from the embarrassments that hem them in on every side," replied Mr. Darlington. "The strong arm of the law *may* yet interfere, I am sorry to say ; Mr. Bellingham will know better than either Philip or I what *can* be done to serve them. I am afraid, my dear, your unhappy uncle will have to leave the country. There is his family to be considered, of course, and I am not sure but that they will remain a helpless burden on your hands."

"That is what I dread, for they will be something more than a mere pecuniary burden, which might be borne. I cannot help it, but I am oppressed by the feeling that I am, to a very great extent, responsible for their future. And they are *not* reasonable ; they have very little idea of helping themselves, and they will depend upon me not only for perpetual funds, but for temporal guidance and protection. And I am not sure that I *ought* to encourage a whole family of hangers-on who are not greatly concerned whether they exert themselves or remain in idleness."

"I am pretty sure that you ought not," replied Cousin

Margery ; "but in such a case it is very difficult to give the soundest advice. Are they all so dreadfully inert?"

"No, not all. Several of them are quite ready to put their shoulders to the wheel, but in their own way—and I am afraid their own way will never succeed ; I had some thoughts of asking Mary Jane to come here and find a home, as well as employment, which would remove all sense of dependence. I must dismiss my present housekeeper, and I had some idea of asking my cousin to take her place, with a first-rate respectable cook under her. But I am afraid it would not answer, and I have others"—with a sly glance at Philip—"to consider as well as myself. You see, I neither could nor would treat Mary Jane as an inferior ; and yet, if she were one of ourselves, and lived with us, there would be always a discordant element in our midst. She is much improved of late, but I cannot fail to perceive that we have very few sentiments in common, and that we should find it rather difficult always to agree. And there is her family—I have no right to separate her from them."

"Certainly not, unless she desires to separate herself. But what does she propose to do under the circumstances ?"

"Her plan is to become a sort of nursery governess, and she could teach a little, certainly—just the rudiments of most things ; but, as far as I can judge, I know no person less fitted for the post in some respects. She has little forbearance, and is not fond of children ; besides, a person of her naturally imperious disposition would be always at feud with her pupils, and at issues with her employers. She might not always be wrong—on the contrary, she might be very frequently in the right, for she has developed a certain amount of good sense since the commencement of her father's misfortunes that has a good deal raised her in my estimation ; but she is disputatious and self-opinionated."

"It would never do to have her here in the position you propose," said Mr. Anderson, thoughtfully. "It would be to sow the seeds of almost inevitable discord : you could not make her happy ; while she would, I am afraid, contribute very much to your unhappiness. The domestic atmosphere of your home would be troubled ; you and your housekeeper-cousin would never harmonise ; one of you

would have perpetually to yield to the other, and it would not be in the fitness of things that you should remain other than mistress of your own house. What kind of education has she received?"

"A very poor one. This reverse is the first real discipline she has ever had to bear; she and her sisters have been a good deal *spoilt* by a mother who could scarcely be more unwise, or more uncertain in her own moods. My aunt is by turns arbitrary and foolishly indulgent; she rules—or has ruled—her family according to her own caprice. One day she is a despot, and will hear no reasons, the next she is a weakling who has no will or purpose of her own. There has been no moral or mental *training* in the case of any of my cousins. Nor have they had proper advantages in the school-room."

"Have any of them a *musical* talent? I have known very stupid and superficially-educated girls play very well indeed, and know something of the science of their favourite study. There is a young person in my own congregation who performs delightfully, though with a little less expression, perhaps, than a *connoisseur* would desire; and she understands what she is about quite well enough to give lessons, and ensure the progress of her pupils."

"The playing of the Misses Stewart is decidedly *médiocre*—even a partial listener could, with truth, say nothing beyond."

"And the second daughter, of whom you have often spoken?" asked Edith. "Is she willing or able to do anything for herself?"

"Sarah Anne, you mean. Well, she intends going to service—or, so she says, though I am not at all sure whether she really means it. I had rather not say anything about her—I am not an impartial critic. I am fain to confess I dislike her extremely. I am ready to do her a good turn if I can; but I should be glad never to be obliged to converse with her again. As far as I am concerned, I would as soon concert with a wasp."

"And the little ones?" inquired Cousin Margery and Tessie, in a breath.

"Oh, there is the best hope; though, so far, the twins,

Victoria and Adelaide, have been badly educated. They have been at a flashy sort of school, where they have been taught that it is the chief duty of young women to marry as early and as splendidly as possible. Still, they are not much beyond childhood, and little Bella is under fifteen. I can send them all three to a really good school, and I think their mother will not object, so that they, at least, may be satisfactorily disposed of. They are too young, as yet, for anything *but* school ; perhaps by the time they are fit to leave it I shall know what else to do with them."

"How would they like to *emigrate*?" said Philip thoughtfully. "Might they not prefer to commence a new life at the antipodes? And might they not have better chances of success?"

"I am tolerably sure they would accept the alternative with rapture ; they have expressed a wish, some of them, to commence afresh in Australia or New Zealand. And I really think it would be a good move for all parties. They are people who must always, more or less, defer to *appearances*, and they will never be able to hold up their heads again in this country, I fear ; they will suffer, too, considerably from false shame as well as from the mortifications that cannot be avoided. I do think that it is an excellent idea, Philip, and I only wonder it has never occurred to me before."

"It is the only thing that *can* be done for them," remarked Mr. Darlington, who had not had very much to say during the conversation in which the fate of the Stewarts was debated. "And it would be good in every way that Mr. Stewart should leave his native land. He will never find employment here, even should he be happy enough to escape the fate of a convict. The whole country, especially London, is terribly exasperated against him. I am not certain though that either he, or the other directors who have not taken to flight, would be allowed to evade their responsibilities by 'levanting,' as I heard it called the other day. The law will have to be consulted."

"It is being consulted now, Cousin Robert. Mr. Bellingham has been with Mr. Westbury, who is the only person that seems to have any pity on the unhappy defaulters, and

somebody of repute is to be retained for the defence of Uncle Stewart, should there be an actual trial. A great many people are convinced that he is not so unscrupulous a rogue as at the first blush seemed to be the case. He has been rash, weak, and foolish : he has been imprudent, and he has been cowardly, though not so cowardly as those gentlemen who have profited by their superior knowledge of facts to appropriate immense sums and take a Transatlantic trip. I can see for myself how greatly Mr. Stewart is to blame, and he is not to be exonerated, though he may be proved to be less fraudulent than his associates, who are, perhaps, at this very moment, laughing at their hapless dupes. But there *are* palliating circumstances, and so Mr. Bellingham thinks ; and at my request he consents to act through others who do not object to conducting this sort of business."

Nothing, however, could be done, either for or against the culprit, till the Christmas holidays were over. But the Stewarts were to be invited to meet the Darlingtons on New Year's Day, for Clare thought it would be well for others besides herself to form an impartial judgment of their probable merits ; and also it would give them a little change ; for Euston Road just now was unspeakably dreary, and they would be well pleased to receive so much attention from herself. Though whether the day would be pleasant to any one *but* the Stewarts, was something more than a moot point ; the party to be assembled at Lowndes Square on the first day of the year must perforce be a singular one, and incongruous, if not antagonistic, in its character.

And the day arrived, and Mrs. Stewart and her daughters came to early luncheon, and remained till quite late in the evening ; and some very curious conversations took place, so that Mr. and Mrs. Darlington and Mr. Warner had small difficulty in forming an opinion of the merits of the family. For all were there, save poor John Thomas himself, who greatly to his credit declined to meet strangers, or any one out of his own immediate circle. When pressed to accompany his wife and the young ladies, he had said, " No ! don't press me, Clare. I can meet you, because you are my

own flesh and blood ; but I cannot encounter people who know me only for what I really am, a disgraced man and a *cheat*. It is quite enough to have to see my creditors and lawyers, and to answer their torturing queries. No, thank you, my dear, I am too much ashamed to show my face where I am not obliged to show it ; and I would give all the money I ever dreamed of possessing if I could wake up some morning and find that I had left old England behind me for ever and ever. I am not fit company for you or yours ; if my wife and the girls had any proper sense of their position, they would sooner die than go into society. *I would*, Clare ; so I pray you leave me alone."

The whole unhappy affair ended, however, in the contemptuous dismissal of Mr. Stewart by his judges ; there was a certain point of law by virtue of which—and it only wanted a very little stretching—he was enabled to defy the infuriated shareholders, inasmuch as the law declared him not legally responsible. And he was free to go whither he would, and as speedily as possible ; but those who had fought hardest to secure his escape sternly and coldly recommended him to lose no time in taking passage to one of the Colonies, and he was strongly advised to adopt a new and less obnoxious cognomen.

Of course, Miss Darlington found the means ; and it was with no niggard hand that she provided the required outfit ; at the same time ensuring, on their arrival at Queensland, the necessary funds that would prevent all embarrassment, and also include the purchase of such land as it might be expedient to acquire. And so on one bright April morning the vessel in which the Stewarts had taken berths sailed down the river, and England beheld them nevermore. Mrs. Stewart did not very long survive her transplantation to the Colonies, and poor Bella drooped from the day she landed on a Southern shore.

Meanwhile, a new Abbey Mill was rising from the old foundations, and the skill of the engineer so devised matters that there would never be the chance of another "inundation." The Mill House was not rebuilt, but the ruinous wing, including the ancient "Watch Tower," was levelled to the ground. Some new rooms were added,

replete with various modern improvements and conveniences ; the gardens were restored to more than their pristine beauty, and the pleasant homestead was once more the scene of peace and plenty.

It had been decreed by those most concerned that the “Home Farm” should be demolished ; and in its place rose a modern and convenient mansion, substantially built, and beautifully finished, surrounded by well-kept gardens and extensive grounds ; and all the necessary offices were forthcoming, since it was still, and ever, to be the “*Home Farm*,” and the farmer was in no wise ashamed of his calling.

But long before the new house was finished there was a quiet wedding in the Beaufort Church, and the wedding breakfast was given at the Beaufort Manse, where Edith had but lately come to preside, and from whence Margaret Anderson was preparing to depart, prior to her own marriage, at Ormstead, with the person whom we have familiarly known in these pages as Dick Darlington. I need scarcely say that the bride was Clare Darlington and the bridegroom Philip Warner.

CHAPTER L.

"NEW DUSTON AND GOOD-BYE."

" We thank Thee, Lord, for this fair earth,
 The glittering sky, the silver sea ;
 For all their beauty, all their worth,
 Their light and glory come from Thee.
 Thanks for the flowers that clothe the ground,
 The trees that wave their arms above,
 The hills that gird our dwellings round,
 As Thou dost gird Thine own with love.

" Yet teach us still how far more fair,
 More glorious, Father, in Thy sight,
 Is one pure deed, one holy prayer,
 One heart that owns Thy Spirit's might ;
 So while we gaze with thoughtful eye
 On all the gifts Thy love has given,
 Help us in Thee to live and die,
 By Thee to rise from earth to heaven."

LET us take a last farewell of the familiar Mill and Mill House, and likewise of its neighbourhood ; for the old "Abbey Mill" has expanded into a little colony, having for its centre the happy home, so beautifully and successfully restored, wherein Clare Darlington first found a refuge just seven years ago. For it is midsummer again ; and the pleasant banks of the brimming Allan Water are in all their glory.

And she is Clare Darlington still, for her husband has taken her name in addition to his own, having no particular tender or happy associations with the patronymic of Warner, and a thousand loving, grateful memories of that which has been dear and honoured ever since the days of childhood. So Clare and Philip are generally known as Mr. and Mrs. Warner-Darlington, of the Home Farm, Moorlandshire ; of Lowndes Square, London ; and of "Tregelles Place"—a lovely little estate on the northern shore of wild, legendary Cornwall, and not so very far away from the sea-blown towers and courtyards of that immemorial old ruin that the world still knows as *Tintagel Castle*.

Philip and Clare are very fond of Tregelles Place, and they go there every year when the harvest is gathered in at Duston, that their children may early love the wonderful Cornish sea and its lovely rocky coast, and the wild health-giving moors, desolate but lovely ; and the breezy sands about Pentargon Bay. They spend a few weeks in Lowndes Square on their return journey to the north, and take their little ones to the Crystal Palace, and the Zoo, and the Tower of London, that they may have, as Philip says, "some other pleasant associations besides those which are purely maritime, or legendary, or rustic." But their favourite and chosen abode is the "Home Farm," which is sometimes called by residents in the neighbourhood "The Manor House," and which they have spared neither pains nor money, nor a perfect taste, to complete and beautify.

I said that quite a colony had grown up about the once solitary Abbey Mill. And it is even so ; for Dick has built himself a commodious residence within a stone's throw of the resuscitated Mill ; and Ralph followed suit, when, several years afterwards, he took to himself a wife, and brought home a bonnie Scottish lassie as Mrs. Ralph Darlington. William Thwaites, the faithful foreman of old, and now chief manager of the old concern, in which he has a pecuniary interest, has also married, and erected a modest mansion of his own. And there are a good many smaller houses and labourers' cottages among the trees, each one having its pretty fruitful garden, and each one built in strict accordance with sanitary principles.

For all the old tumble-down cottages have been mercifully pulled down, neither the miller nor his sons, nor Mr. and Mrs. Warner-Darlington, having the slightest respect for any sort of religion that does not take into grave consideration the well-being and physical and moral improvement of the labouring poor, to whom manufacturers and landowners owe so much of their own prosperity.

Of course, there are schools and a public hall, half coffee-tavern and half-institute, where the farm-labourers and the mill-men can meet of an evening, and talk, and listen to occasional lectures, and *speechify*, if it so pleases them. For the British workman loves to listen to his own eloquence ;

and why should he not, if he can turn his humble talent to good, and shun the demagogue form of oratory?

The last addition to the little village, which Lina has insisted on christening “New Duston,” is a beautiful little church—“a perfect gem” in its way, yet wonderfully commodious, and so perfectly ventilated that no one ever has to yield to irresistible drowsiness, or is compelled to seek the purer air, in a state of temporary asphyxia, before the service is concluded.

And close by this happy sanctuary—through the open windows of which you can hear, in the summer-time, the low murmur of the mill-stream and of the shining Allan River, and see the rich foliage of the trees that sweep the verdure of the lawn-like meadows—is the *manse*, which is already gay with clematis and recently-planted climbing roses, and a brilliant pyracanthus, that has taken most kindly to the soil. And in the manse resides the pious and earnest pastor, whom it has been the inestimable happiness of the Darlingtons to secure as first minister of the Duston Congregational Church; and, with him, Tessie—who boasts that she has made “the best and happiest match of all the Darlingtons!” And of course Clare and Edith, and Dick and Ralph, are every one of them fully convinced that this is a little exaggeration on dear Tessie’s part; but they let her have her say, notwithstanding, and, perhaps, each one of these young people thinks himself, or herself, blest above all others in the holy estate of matrimony.

It was on one of the most beautiful June evenings of that most beautiful summer that Mr. and Mrs. Darlington—“the old people,” I mean, for that is what all good folks come to be called when they have married sons and daughters living in the same neighbourhood—were sitting under the great spreading horse-chestnut, on the little verdant mound where Clare and Tessie had picked red-currants just seven years ago. They were looking for some “of the children,” who for the most part were in the habit of finding their way to the old Mill House after the business of the day was over. Cousin Margery was knitting a very delicate pair of tiny socks for one of her baby grandchildren, of whom she had, by this time, several; for Clare and Philip were

blessed with one fine boy and two lovely little daughters, the youngest still in arms ; Mr. and Mrs. Anderson had four stalwart lads, one of them scarcely three months old ; Dick and Ralph had each a nursery of their own ; and Tessie rejoiced in one baby girl, who was esteemed, by her mother, at least, the loveliest child that was ever born. The miller was dividing his attention between the *Times*, which Charley Anderson generally forwarded to him twice or thrice a week, and his pipe, which he has taken of late to smoke every night regularly. He had shown symptoms of *asthma* during the last winter, his wife said, and his evening pipe was good for him, and tended to soothe his nerves.

"We shall see some of the children directly, I suppose," said the miller presently, after gazing in one particular direction a good many times in vain. "Philip looked in about that barley early in the afternoon, and he said that Clare and he would come up this evening, and perhaps stay supper if we were hospitable enough to invite them. Clare particularly wished to sup here," he added.

"I think I know why ; I have thought of her to-day more than once, dear child."

"And what made you think of her to-day, and expect her to supper, I wonder ? "

"Oh, my dear, do you not remember ? Why, it is exactly seven years to-night since you drove down in the new wagonette to Woodhampton Station, to meet our darling girl. And how we wondered what the town-bred cousin would be like, and how she would take to a homely, country life."

"So it is !—seven years to-night since I first brought her, a poor, tired, jaded, way-worn traveller to the Abbey Mill. I scarcely dared to hope then, nor for long afterwards, that we had found another daughter."

"It did seem at one time as if we should never win her love and confidence ; and I did grudge her to that poor Lady Forest, just as we were getting fond of her, and looking upon her as one of ourselves. Well, you see, it was all for the best ; God saw what was good for her, and for us, too. Yes, I recollect how I said, when we had that first letter from her, 'Is God going to give us another child ?' and you

answered, ‘Yes, dear ; another child for us to love and care for, and, perhaps, a child to love and care for us, in years to come.’ It is strange that these two—our adopted ones, Philip and Clare—should have been our greatest blessings in a worldly point of view. Our own boys and girls have always been very dear and good ; but I don’t know what we should have done without Clare and Philip in our day of adversity.”

“God sent them to us, Margery—I like to think that all one’s treasures are of His sending, and come direct from Him. Our Father knew what our needs would be, and He provided for them long before we concerned ourselves about future perplexities. Sometimes, when I think of it—and I think of it pretty often—I feel as if I could not help breaking out into the old doxology that I learnt at my mother’s knees, ‘Praise God, from whom all blessings flow.’ Yes, the little blessings as well as the great ones, if indeed there are *little* blessings. But I believe in God’s sight there is nothing trivial ; the smallest events may herald the most momentous issues. And here are the children, I believe ; I see the gleam of Clare’s white muslin through those overhanging branches.”

And in another minute Clare had stepped into the chestnut shade, and was asking affectionately, “Well, mother, had you almost given us up ?”

For both Clare and Philip had long ago learned to call the dear old couple father and mother. And “mother” replied, “Why, yes, my dear, you are a little later than usual ; but the evenings now are so long and so warm, and there is no real *night* just now.”

“Philip was ready directly after tea, and so, indeed, was I ; but baby began to cry, and I did not like to leave her to nurse. I think, mother, she is cutting another tooth ; she is certainly a little feverish, so I gave her a dose of *aconitum*, and she soon fell asleep. I could not stay away to-night of all nights, you know.”

“Of course not ; I think we should have come to you if you had not made your appearance before the gloaming. I quite expected you, Clare, and father and I have been talking about you, and your first coming here.”

"My first *coming home!* The happiest evening of my life, though I did not find it out all at once. Have you heard from Edith?"

"I had a letter from Charlie this morning, and all are quite well. He promises, too, to bring his wife and the children in time for your harvest-supper, if he can arrange to be absent in August, according to yearly custom. And as they will have to visit all the houses in turn, and, of course, to spend a little while at Ormstead, he hints at leaving Edith and the little boys behind him for me to look after when duty calls him home. It would be hard if father and I did not have rather more of her than any of the rest."

"And Lina will return with Edith and the children, I suppose? That was the plan, I know."

"Yes; and Lina is such a strong-minded woman—or rather, I should say, woman of faculty—that Edith will be quite content to avail herself of her escort, and so spare Charlie the second journey on her own account."

"Where are Philip and father?"

"Gone to look at Strawberry's new calf, I dare say; it is the prettiest little creature you ever saw. Do you care to go and see it?"

"Not just now, thank you, for I am a little tired, and Strawberry will not be hurt if I defer my complimentary visit. Besides, I have two pieces of news for you, and I am burning to disclose them. I only wonder Philip did not forestall me when he was with father before tea."

"He said nothing, or I think I should have known; father never keeps news to himself."

"Well, my new book is out, and is already a great success. And I am thinking what I shall do with the money it will bring in. The last cheque went towards building the church."

"What do you *want* to do with it?"

"I don't quite know. I was going to give a clock to the church-tower, for all the people would like that; but Dorothea Vanderquist has taken that matter out of my hands. What do you say to a new organ—a nice, sweet-toned organ? I am rather ashamed of that harmonium, though Tessie does manage it splendidly."

“That will do grandly, I should say. Of course, Philip approves ?”

“Of course he does ; in fact, I think he was really the first to propose it. You know he loves good music.”

“What a magnificent voice he has !”

“I found that out the first Sunday I was here, when you had that service in the dining-room. Shall I ever forget it ? I do believe the influence of those prayers, and the impression made by that dear old hymn, never quite died away. And it was in that *Te Deum* that came afterwards, I first heard my husband’s wonderful voice. I little thought that morning that he would ever be my husband—my own dear, noble husband—for whom I thank God continually. Yes, Philip would prefer the new organ above anything else, I know. It must be a fine one, but not *too* powerful for the building.”

“But what is the second piece of news, my dear ?”

“Nothing less than a pleasant, long letter from Australia —full of happy tidings.”

“From your Uncle Stewart ?”

“No ; from Mrs. Bloomer —what a new-world name it sounds like, to be sure !—from Mary Jane, you know ; she calls her husband a *stockman*. I will leave the letter that father may look over it at his leisure ; but I must read you a little bit for yourself, now at once. Mary Jane begins by talking all about the cattle and the sheep, &c., &c. ; then she goes on to send thanks to Philip for his writing to her last autumn, after little Maggie’s birth ; then she continues : ‘And so we are doing very well, for Harry does nothing but prosper, as, indeed, he deserves, for he is the best of husbands and a very good father, and so industrious, and as steady as old Time.’

“You will want to know something about the others. Well, Carrie has married a fine young man who keeps a store at Melbourne, and they have two children, and are getting on splendidly, and Carrie never touches the piano, because her husband hates it ! The twins, also, are both comfortably settled. Victoria is married to a wholesale provision merchant, and Adelaide to his brother, who is in some sort of business at a place called Hindmarsh. Sarah

Anne is *not* married. Somehow the men don't take to her, and I think she bids fair to be an old maid. Harry and she did not get on, and that fretted me, of course ; and it was a grief to poor father, for he had decided to live with us, and was quite happy but for Sally's little tempers and tantrums. At last Harry could bear it no longer, and he flamed out one day, and said something so outrageous that Sally went off into hysterics, and said she was most cruelly treated. After that there was never any peace, and the upshot of it was that father built himself a little log-house on the other side of the gum-trees, that make quite a forest—a very shadeless one, though—beyond our own new clearing. We see them pretty often, of course, and father looks in most evenings to have a gossip with Harry and a *romp* with the children, of whom he is very fond. But Sally grows glumpier every day, and she gives us but little of her company.

"I dare say you would find it more solitary than was agreeable quite at "Bloomertown." We call it that, but there isn't any town—not the ghost of one. Our nearest neighbour lives quite on the other side of the Bush—I don't know how many miles away. Of course we have no church, for the best reason in the world—we could not anyhow get a congregation that would fill one of our smallest rooms. But Harry reads the prayers most Sundays, and has got hold of some of Mr. Spurgeon's sermons, and we like them very much. And if the children are not crying, we generally sing a hymn—one of Moody and Sankey's. Father keeps tolerably well, but he is seldom quite cheerful. He can never forget his disgrace, he often tells me, when we are alone ; and he must go softly all his days. He is still known here as Mr. Brown ; but I summoned courage, and told Harry all about it when he first came courting me ; and I was married under my own lawful name of MARY JANE STEWART.'

"There is a great deal more which, perhaps, you will like to read, mother, so I will leave you the letter for a day or two ; and Polly promises us some photos, both of themselves and of the house when next she sends. The children have been taken, she says, but the portraits are bad, and in

no way ‘do them justice’; and, only fancy, she recollects Miss Argles, and inquires after her!”

“I shall inquire after her, too. She talked of coming for your harvest-home, but she has not written to me since the end of April.”

“I heard from her the other day, and she is coming to the farm as soon as the school breaks up. I think I shall try to make fresh arrangements with her; she would be inestimably useful amongst us all.”

“So she would; but, mind, I have engaged her to stop with *me* while Edith and the children are here, and while Lina is away in London. I really see no reason why she should not give up her post at Dorset House.”

“Nor I, either. I told her when she visited us at Christmas that she was old enough to resign now; and when she talked about an almshouse I told her we could not spare her to *any* institution. She might make her permanent home with me, for she would be a great comfort in a hundred ways, and the rest of us would like to have her at hand, ready for all sorts of emergencies.”

And at this point arrived Dick and Margaret, and Ralph and his bonnie Jean, and the conversation became more discursive; and presently Lina came from the house to greet them all, and say supper was ready, and father and Philip waiting in the dining-room.

It reminded Clare very much of that first supper prepared for her seven years ago. There were two of those marvellous pies, the best that were ever eaten; but Lina compounded them now instead of her mother, who complained of finding the kitchen a little too warm and fatiguing. There was the old array of jellies, and creams, and custards, and crystal dishes heaped with fruit, and there were plump roasted chickens, and hams such as Moorlandshire is proud of; and, to crown all, a splendid bowl of a particular kind of “trifle,” the recipe of which was an invention of Lina’s, that she would give to no living soul; though she had no objection to preparing, with her own hands, a dish of *her* “trifle” whenever it was required by any member of the family.

Supper being duly discussed, “worship” followed, the

miller presiding, according to custom, in the midst of his family ; and then the married couples bade affectionate "good-night" to the parents, and set off for their own homes.

Philip and Clare had the longest walk, and it was nearly eleven o'clock when they found themselves on the outskirts of their own shrubbery. It was a lovely night ; the sunset glow yet lingered on the horizon, the trees showed grandly against the clear blue sky, faintly sprinkled over with pale stars ; the crescent moon was just sinking behind a rocky hill, and the river flowed softly across the lawn-like mead, limpid in the deep shade of the overhanging branches, and black as liquid ebony.

They lingered a little while on the terrace immediately under the windows, before they went indoors, just to look round once more, as Philip said, upon their "goodly heritage."

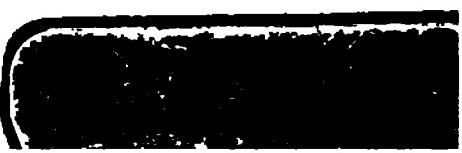
"It is a goodly heritage, indeed !" responded Clare, as her glance fell tenderly upon the beautiful expanse of rock, and wood, and water, and on the fruitful lands that lay within their own cherished borders. "How good it all is, and how sweet ! Surely God has crowned us with a thousand blessings, Philip dear ; we can never be as thankful as we should be !"

"No ; we must wait for another life for *that*! Meanwhile, let us be as thankful as we *can* be, and live, as far as may be, to the praise and glory of Him from whose Hand come all these precious things. Shall we not pray continually 'that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful, and that we show forth His praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by walking before Him in holiness and righteousness all our days' ?"

And Clare added reverently, "'Through Jesus Christ our Lord.' Yes ; that is, indeed, prayer and thanksgiving all in one ; and meet for the hearts and lips of the whole Church Militant here upon earth ; nor will it ever cease, I think, to thrill our memories in the world of glory beyond the grave."

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